

Screen



German cinema history

Independent television production

Sri Lankan film

Yellow Earth and Devi

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Sins of commission

ROD STONEMAN

An oblique encounter with television, the provenance of independents, the role of chance, the passage of workshops and diverse other stories. . . .

This article attempts to chart a particular encounter with television across a decade and is articulated from inside one of the broadcasting institutions. It has its origins in a rather specific personal trajectory stretching from involvement in para-Screen theory of the late seventies,¹ via some independent programme production² to work as an apparatchik of Channel Four almost from its conception in the early eighties. As Consultant, then Assistant Commissioning Editor, and Deputy Commissioning Editor, this work has developed as part of a project for radical television that started inside an institution (soon calling itself The Company) itself taking shape in the dawning of more optimistic aspirations.

The image of Channel Four often encountered abroad as an inspiring beacon, an exemplary model of a new generation of publisher-broadcasters is projected as myth, nature or fetish. From afar, an imaginary unity is often imposed on the divergences and differences which fissure any organization. The Independent Film and Video Department has contributed significantly to Channel Four's image through commissioning and buying a range of political and personal-documentary, experiment, access and community programmes, low-budget fiction and third-world cinema. The department's annual budget has risen from about £1.5 million in 1981/2 to a peak of £10 million in 1990; adding up to perhaps £50 million and around a thousand hours of programmes passing through the department in the last ten years.

1 Screen board 1980-5, SEFT Education Officer 1982-3, WEA and university extra-mural courses in Plymouth and Bristol, Art College teaching in Exeter and Falmouth.

2 *Photomontage Today*: Peter Kennard, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1983, not broadcast; *Ireland: The Silent Voices*, Channel Four, 1983; *Italy: the Image Business*, Channel Four, 1984; *Between Object and Image*, British Council/TVE (Spain), 1986.

The 'd'ou je parle'

Outside, inside, elsewhere – the position from which one speaks inevitably underlies what is said and how it is said, perhaps not as a sole determination but certainly as a considerable factor in this discourse, these explanations. . . . Whatever the connection with and concern for the independent sector, there are different agendas and time scales for someone working inside Channel Four – it is sometimes an unbridgeable gap. It is never easy to live one thing and think another. These views may draw fire as a great deal is at stake in this outline of unsteady perceptions, partial analyses and fallible decisions. Unlike other semi-academic interventions too many livelihoods have been affected by these arguable tendencies.

Carrying the unwieldy framework of seventies *Screen* theory into the practice of British broadcasting has involved a curious journey leading to some strange connections – manifest, for example, in the unlikely experience of reading two magazines entitled *Iris*: one a scholarly journal of film theory published in French and English by Bordwell and Thompson, the other an irregularly published Irish Republican magazine featuring a section entitled 'War News' – the direct speech of the IRA. The unusual intersection of otherwise discrete discourses leads to an ironic and relativist distance between the various 'worlds' at play and a momentary displacement of the self from the actual field of engagement.

Any self-examination in terms of class, gender and race raises the questions of who ends up in television? Whatever the identity people initially bring to television, the work and its context eventually have an effect: gradual implicit institutional repositioning.

Clearly there are disproportionately low numbers of women, non-white or working-class people in positions of power in British television. Three of the thirteen Channel Four Board members were women in 1983, in 1991 the numbers remain the same. Perhaps more significantly there were four women among the original thirteen commissioning editors, while almost a decade later it is only two out of sixteen. But of those from such groups that have 'got through', unless they strive to remain consciously connected to their communities of interest and their original imaginary identities, they can become displaced, deflected and repositioned. There is something sad in the spectacle of disavowal as powerful individuals, recently confirmed in position, distance themselves from their constituencies in an exaggerated way, pulling the ladder up behind them.

One correlative gauge of the change in Channel Four over the years is that the initial, brave tendency to draw in editorial people from outside television has been gradually eroded as recruitment became increasingly oriented towards taking other 'professionals' from within television with prealigned and compatible ideologies.

3 Rod Stoneman, 'Film-related practice and the avant garde', *Screen*, vol. 20, nos 3-4 (1979-80), pp. 40-57.

The original incorporation of someone like myself from the co-op end of the Independent Filmmakers' Association into the Channel Four Trojan horse seems rather less likely now.

In these curious and puzzling times when a number of dramatic historical shifts are taking place, when so many received ideas and values are challenged, a heightened degree of openness and self-questioning seems necessary. Despite the theoretical reflexivity of Marxism which (like psychoanalysis) should constantly reexamine its own project, discourses and determinations, left positions have too often been characterized by an inadequate grasp of the complexities of reality. The subtle dialectics of the original thought system can easily calcify into rather manichean understandings of the world.

Whilst restraining the dangers of introversion it seems relevant to refer to the hitherto unspeakable terrain of the autobiographical. Unspeakable in the sense that seventies *Screen* theory, like other forms of ultra-rationalist discourse traditionally inhibited the self (that which thinks it is 'I'), preferring forms of enunciation which avoided the personal pronoun.

Many factors determine the changes in perspective which distance this article, for instance, (written in late 1991) from the last article I wrote on independent film published in *Screen* at the end of 1979.³ Not least that the energy and focus of everyday life has shifted in a decade with the accretion of some more age/history, not to mention History itself. . . .

Models

There used to be a simple analytical model available to account for that which ended up on the television screen and the decision-making processes behind it. Any image/political construction was to be understood as the result of the specific interplay of three factors:

- 1) *conspiracy*: deliberate, conscious intervention
- 2) *ideology*: unconscious assimilated values and frameworks
- 3) *chance*: aleatoric factors

It often seemed necessary to stress the high degree of specificity that the different interaction and balance of factors produced in every instance.

From the outset, teaching about television from the outside, this model seemed to work on the basis of the quotidian experience of viewing and analysis. It was developed within the theoretical frameworks laid across television studies by the political and analytical impulse of the seventies.

Perhaps any attempted reformulation of the television-studies model as a result of direct encounters with many of these processes



(All illustrations in this article
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Doesn't.)

UNITI MA SEMPRE DIVISI
United but always divided

ten years later would not be so different. There is often some degree of contention at various levels of the television decision-making processes – whether about particular programmes, series and seasons or over the development of general policies:

1) *Conspiracy*: it has been relatively rare to encounter traces inside Channel Four of direct, conscious, politically motivated intervention, but there have been some bruising encounters with outside entities: right-wing lobbyists like the Freedom Association and the Mozambique Institute, or the IBA/ITC, BCC, BSC and other regulatory acronyms. Examples of political and sexual transgression are as different as the interview with IRA member Mairead Farrell in *Mother Ireland* (1991) or the tumescent genitals in *WR Mysteries of the Organism* (1991). At the time of writing there are currently official complaints about four of the twenty films transmitted in the

'Down Under' season: including *Ghosts of the Civil Dead* (1991) and the notorious *Salt, Saliva, Sperm and Sweat* (1991).

2) *Ideology*: despite Channel Four's liberal assumptions and proclaimed pluralist framework, it is crucial that the encroachment of vague but pernicious ideological assumptions of a conservative character do not become more pervasive in the new semi-commercial context. Another relevant example would be the effect of the 1988 Ireland broadcasting ban: as broadcasters unconsciously begin to self-censor, conspiracy creates a space for ideological inhibition.

3) *The enhanced role of chance*: this ancient goddess of the Aeolian harp plays a far greater and more consistently inconsistent role than one would have assumed from outside. But there is not so much that can be said and (by definition) less that can be done about this fundamental factor in the role of things.

Moving from the previous abstract model to the anthropological observation of empirical decision-makers, one accumulates an awareness of the operations of power in the display of television executive skills en route. They seem to involve the operation of a refined tactical instinct in a field of force; the sixth sense to anticipate and navigate the result of 'judicious' transmission decisions. Jeremy Isaacs has described carrying out just such a strategic 'touch to the tiller' in Channel Four's programming in 1983-4⁴ – the adept executive having, to continue the nautical metaphor, to read the weather and trim the sails. Foresight about what is possible at any given conjuncture is quite unconscious for the most part and thus often difficult to engage with. I guess that developing and adapting some version of this censorious anticipation has also been essential to the survival of the Independent Film and Video Department inside Channel Four as a whole.

The passage of workshops

This wider ranging article originated from an invitation to respond to Alan Lovell's 'That was the workshops that was'⁵ which mounted several partial arguments seemingly at cross purposes with one another. It expounded an almost *ad hominem* employee/employer register of complaint, combined with imprecise (self-)criticism of workshop-sector programme-making, described as the 'degree zero of documentary' and finally drifted into an irrelevant restatement of cultural populism. For a historical materialist, albeit of an anarchist tendency, the critique is remarkably devoid of any sense of history or the dynamic of change, rather it displays the small-business mentality that many in the workshop sector inexorably fell into.

Considerations of the provenance of the workshop movement

⁴ Jeremy Isaacs, *Storm Over 4* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), pp. 63-5.

⁵ Alan Lovell, 'That was the workshops that was', *Screen*, vol. 31, no. 1 (1990), pp. 102-8.



begin from the base of the political possibilities of the late seventies; although there existed a longer preformulation of co-operative filmmaking aspirations amongst groups such as Cinema Action, the Berwick Street Collective, and Amber Films in Newcastle from the early seventies.

Many individual filmmakers and a few of the groups were drawn together at the First Festival of Independent British Cinema held in Bristol in February 1975. The rapid expansion of independent film workshops is indicated a few years later by at least twenty groups being represented at the Bristol conference held in May 1979⁶ (a flurry of London groups declined to attend because they had not organized it and were predictably suspicious of a non-metropolitan initiative). Other, looser, umbrella organizations such as the London Filmmakers' Co-op, London Video Arts⁷ and the idiosyncratic Fantasy Factory were creating and positioning themselves at this time. The Sector, as it came to call itself, was increasingly self-identified and organized.

Part of the adjacent history of these movements was an earlier initiative to nationalize the entire British film industry; the ACCT published a report (that might fairly be characterized as ultra-left in origin and strategy) in the early seventies which proposed that the entire British industry should come into public ownership under workers' control as 'only public ownership can meet the creative, democratic and economic challenge of the years until the end of the century'.⁸ This vanguardist initiative received little support

6 *Independent Film Workshops in Britain*, Torquay, 1979.

7 London Video Access since 1988.

8 Alan Sapper quoted in Simon Hartog (ed.), *Nationalising the Film Industry* (London: ACTT, 1973).

among the wider membership and was quietly and quickly dropped.

By the late seventies echelons from the proto-workshop movement made direct and potentially fertile contact with the last Labour government. A little to everyone's surprise, discussions with Michael Meacher, then junior minister in the Department of Trade, led to the concrete proposal that a structure of small production units with permanent staffs be funded on the basis of a programme of work that would be carried out over a number of years instead of funding for one-off projects. Funds for distribution would be included in production budgets and a circuit of twenty-five small cinemas would be run by exhibition co-operatives. The definition of each unit's production programme and decisions about which projects it produced would be the responsibility of the filmmakers in the unit itself. The development programme proposed that five new workshops would be financed each year for five years (four of each five to be outside London).⁹ It seemed as if the workshop sector's self-development might be expanded and sustained by substantial state funding. Enormous energy, potential and optimism pervaded discussions at this time as the conception was developed in a rapid and agile fashion and the infrastructure of innovative audiovisual co-operative units spread regionally.

The abrupt fall of that Labour administration initiated the epoch of Thatcher's conservatism and the end of the proposal. But within two years Channel Four, in partnership with the British Film Institute and other bodies, began to realize a scaled-down version of the same workshop strategy. Inevitably elements of this opportunistic transposition were problematic from the start – the attempt to place a large-scale long-term structure in a commercially funded, albeit public-service, television station.

The overall context of this period involved the movement of some sections of a dissident cultural intelligentsia into television (several from the *Screen*/BFI penumbra), carrying the values of late sixties radicalism into the broadcasting of the Thatcher years. Indeed the Annan Committee's 1977 recommendations can be seen as the last document of the benign post-war settlement, and Channel Four as its delayed and overdue progeny. It is a relevant irony that by the time the seventies lobbying was eventually effective, the television station it had created was based on the ideas and values from a previous epoch – belatedly launched into a rather new situation.

The nascent Channel Four had another ambiguity at its centre from its inception. Initiating a new generation of publisher-broadcasters, it opened the progressively pluralist possibilities of programming from a wide range of autonomous independents with variegated views. But this possibility was built upon the uninhibited choice of short-term insecure engagements from a pool of increasingly desperate semi-dependents competing in a 'free'

9 Simon Hartog, 'The perils of film policy', *Independent Film Workshops in Britain*.

market. Inevitably it involved the destruction of existing broadcasting infrastructures and of the continuity and security of employment in large broadcasting organizations. *Gauchiste* colleagues in the Channel Four Lobby Group and in the IPPA consistently disavowed the problematic effect of imposing independent quotas on the political and employment structures of the television industry. Unfortunately, this – the central contradiction of the Channel Four model and the dilemmas it poses – has rarely been discussed or confronted.

The formulation of the much quoted remit within the 1980 Act: 'to innovate and experiment in the form and content of programmes, cater for interests that ITV does not, to provide a distinctive service . . .' was of course never unassailable. But however vague or fragile, the notion of innovation is proving more durable and graspable than the current fetishism of an ineffable 'quality'.

For the workshops the important thing to remember is that they, and (to some extent) the unlikely bedfellows ITN, Diverse and Mersey Television (which makes *Brookside*), were the only exceptions to the standard short-term relationship with independents in that they were contracted for medium-term output (one to three years) rather than programme by programme.

At its height a budget of about £2 million from Channel Four contributed to a network of twelve to fifteen workshops each year. The original centrifugal aims were manifest in the regional/national spread; two groups in Northern Ireland, one in Scotland and two in Wales gave emphasis to non-British cultural and national identities. Other specific priorities led to the support of four black and Asian workshops and three women's groups over the years, a considerable strengthening of the production capacity of these sections of the independent sector and the representation of the communities of interest they connect with. The instigation of the Workshop Declaration by the ACTT in 1984 involved a close and formalized role for the film and television union in all discussions. Inevitably there were some frictions, part of a healthy syndicalist dynamic between the workshop committee and Channel Four apparatchiks, but in general a workable relationship pertained. Normally Channel Four was only interested in rights for British television and so uncertainty, impatience and sometimes hostility grew around the special negotiations that were necessary to shift the balance of rights towards the Channel before it would agree to provide the higher levels of finance involved in each low-budget fiction film. There were also problems around the abstruse and obscure calculations necessary to operate the 'buy-back' formula – the fee payable on transmission of a workshop programme.

Creative release occurred as archaic industrial craft demarcation lines were successfully dissolved and workshop members could move

flexibly between production roles – researcher one day, sound recordist the next, editor the day after. Although understandably created as a syndicalist counteraction to unrestrained employer exploitation and surplus value accumulation, these restrictions were notoriously clumsy and ineffective in the production situation and, seen in an international perspective, bizarre. There were some inevitable problems with the relation between the co-operative/democratic impulse and creative processes of production. For many groups the sensitive choice involved in prioritizing competing projects developed by different individuals within a non-hierarchical group was externalized – left to the broadcaster to select via its Commissioning Editors.

At a political and cultural level, with the exception of the connected and militant work done during the miners' strike, the regional infrastructure rarely came into productive relationship or realized its full potential. A network of autonomous groups owning and controlling their own means of production should surely have led to more energetic exchange and experiment, higher cultural profile, a profusion of video newsletters, pilots, polemics, poems and provocations.

Any fuller assessment and analysis of workshop programme-making should take place elsewhere but, in brief, the system produced in ten years many good, some extraordinary, and a few brilliant programmes. Certainly, many groups and individuals strengthened and developed their work in the looser space offered by a workshop contract and as a result are making enhanced contributions to production and regional development. The examples of the much vaunted 'integrated practice', combining production with exhibition, distribution and training, working well in workshop structures were rarer. The balanced relation of production to the other connected activities was undermined and distorted by Channel Four's intervention itself. Quite quickly funded groups prioritized production for television and neglected their training and resource commitments.

Relatively few finished programmes (documentary or fiction) were characterized by the specifics of workshop production – that is to say relatively few could only have been made by long-term funded, co-operatively structured groups. From the viewer's perspective, which must weigh heavily, it is only that which is manifest in the text/on screen which counts. And despite the relative stability of continuity funding and closer relations with the communities in which they were situated, there were very few films or tapes which showed this in discernibly different ways from those of other independent production companies.

Although much was made of the workshops' relative autonomy enshrined in the contract, perhaps one can note that, from a perspective inside the Independent Film and Video Department, the

experience of working with workshops was not very different from commissioning – in either the process or the cost of a production, or the aesthetics or politics of the result.

As part of the historical background of this period the TV AM lockout initiated the equivalent of a post-Wapping era in television industrial relations. Also the formal role that the ACTT had found was increasingly uncomfortable and anachronistic within Channel Four. In tandem with the Conservative government's changes in employment law, minor alterations in the formulation of production contracts at about this time betray a small but significant change of verb: from the original formulation 'Channel Four *requires* producers to work with relevant union agreements' to 'Channel Four *advises*. . .'.

As the decade wore on, the economics of this enterprise began to deteriorate. By the later eighties, as national and local state support receded, Channel Four was funding the majority of groups to between eighty and ninety per cent of their total income. This created an effective dependency and began to pull each group into a commissioning relationship, each producing a single project for transmission every year. From the broadcaster's point of view the original relationship only made sense if it were a co-partner with other state funders supporting a critical mass of workshops. If, say, twenty-five workshops were producing forty pieces of various shapes and sizes each year, a looser and less dependent relationship might have pertained.

The original concept, formulated in the discussions with the Labour Party and the BFI, was for an open system which ingested new, young filmmakers and embodied an element of fluidity and change within a network based on continuity. As the Channel Four funded workshops became more entrenched, the need for new groups and individuals to enter the workshop formation and break into what was increasingly seen as a closed cartel became acute. Seen as much 'easier to stay in than to get out', the acronym of the National Organization of Workshops was satirically inverted to WON – expressing the closed, remote and introverted nature of the workshop sector when seen from the more precarious perspective of many other independents and community media activists.

Awareness of the stasis of the sector in the Channel as a whole was probably a small determinant; the built-in novelty factor at Channel Four (demanding a kind of premature obsolescence in many strands of production and programming) was a dangerous predisposition which was bound to counter the notion of continuity. The Independent Film and Video Department's own version of television executive instincts came to the fore as enthusiasm for the 'difference' of the workshop system was gradually replaced by scepticism. It should also be said that, in general, with one or two exceptions, the workshops never managed to connect with other

commissioning areas in the Channel or indeed with other British broadcasters or funders.

The whole enterprise ended with something less than a bang as the Department decided to open out the £2 million budget previously reserved exclusively for official workshops into the 'Television With A Difference' scheme, a two-year transition supposedly extending the workshop-funding basis to any individual or group (including those not franchised by the union). It became difficult to reserve a budget of this scale for the production of a set of programmes that were not linked to a specific slot in the schedule. Although this scheme enabled many producers to shoot and edit over an extended period and some strong pieces emerged from it, in the context of diminishing departmental finance this half-way stage became untenable and the separate budget was finally abandoned in 1991.

When Mao Tse Tung was asked if the French Revolution of 1789 had been successful he apparently replied 'It's too early to tell.': the same could be said of the workshop movement. Its significant achievements will doubtless be reassessed and chronicled eventually; but it can already be asserted that any future attempt to build a regional structure of independent producers to challenge the centripetal forces of the metropolis will have to refer again to the workshop experience in Britain 1980–90.

The provenance of (some) independents

As described in the previous section, the cultural origin of many of the individuals and groups who fed into Channel Four through the early *Eleventh Hour* was rooted in a lively pre-existent film culture – part of the discursive superstructure of a sector which included the emergent workshops, though the nexus for most individuals and some groups was the Independent Filmmakers' Association. The IFA was a loose alliance of the widest range of culturally and politically motivated independent practices, which included not only filmmakers but also critics, distributors, exhibitors and teachers. It is difficult to underestimate the interactivity during the 'moment' of *Screen*; BFI, SEFT and the Edinburgh events all provided foci of related activity and discussion (within shared assumptions).

However, *Screen* seemed to cast a rather intimidating and inhibiting shadow and its formidable theoretical explorations were interpreted mainly as a limitation or constraint on independent filmmakers. The configuration of Marx, Saussure and Freud and their progeny Althusser, Metz and Lacan provoked furious intellectual debate but also posed significant problems of interpretation and application. The British version of this continental discourse seemed impossible to square with the 'normal' creative

10 For example: Claire Johnston and Paul Willemen, 'Brecht in Britain: the independent political film', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 4, (1975-6), pp. 101-18; Peter Gidal, 'The anti-narrative', *Screen*, vol. 20, no. 2 (1979), pp. 73-93; John Ellis, 'The BFI production board', *Screen*, vol. 17, no. 4 (1976-7), pp. 9-23, with letters in response by Peter Wollen and Jane Clarke in vol. 18, no. 1 (1987), pp. 119-22.

and imaginative processes of audiovisual production. In so far as the *weltanschauung* of *Screen* penetrated the independent sector, it had a rather uneven and constraining effect.

Part of the problem was that, initially at least, *Screen* was looking to classical Hollywood and only gradually connected with modern cinema and television at all; and even then felt unsure and uncomfortable relating to indigenous independent product. Some seminal analyses of independent film were published¹⁰ but they were few and far between. One can interpret the rare inclusion of these occasional articles in terms of the *Screen* board's reluctant solidarity with progressive production and a politically motivated form of guilt did seem to underlie the magazine's belated address to the independent sector. But the maelstrom of theoretical (theological) disputes on *Screen* boards and sectarian bloodletting on SEFT executives largely passed the production sector by and in contrast, perhaps, *Framework*, with its combination of reviews, attention to third-world cinema and international independents, seemed to offer a looser and more productive relationship (although this underfunded magazine was never able to carry its precarious project through in a sustained way).

The contemporary models offered to practitioners interested in progressive and theoretically informed creative work seemed merely to encompass the short span from Godard to Straub/Huillet and back again. Unfortunately, even figures such as Kluge, Makavejev or Oshima stayed at the edge of the debate and hardly widened the spectrum of non-naturalistic form. Noël Burch's notable attempt to extend the frame of reference to Japanese cinema, Dreyer and others remained peripheral.

The legacy of this schooling was that many filmmakers had minimal knowledge, experience or interest in continuity cutting or directing actors or achieving narrative rhythm. The old adage about acquiring the discipline and precision of traditional methods of working (say figurative painting) being a necessary precursor for departure towards experiment (say abstraction) seems pertinent.

The independent sector produced several examples of the 'textual film': an eventual legacy of this formative genre for many filmmakers was that when television offered new budgets and the possibilities of wider audiences they were initially struggling to find appropriate forms either to utilize mainstream 'grammar' with adequate control and precision or even to counter the dominant mode of representation in a conscious, elegant and successful way. Ideologues of the television industry constantly utilize a concept of professionalism to justify exclusion, but the term could be redefined as 'serious in intent and deliberate in realization'. To shoot a scene hand-held, 'badly' or edit it with jump cuts should then be the result of a determined strategy rather than incidental ineptitude.

There were recurrent examples of 'roughness' in early *Eleventh*

Hour documentary work: the placing of captions in a subtitled interview, the calculated use of voice over, the construction of an ending (not to be mistaken as the battle of polysemy against closure!). In fiction there were particularly serious problems with the consistency of acting codes (often given away through the voice/soundtrack), writing and script construction, and the speed and the rhythm of a narrative.

Before these would-be constructive criticisms turn into a litany of complaint or a threnody of lamentation, a rational contextual explanation may be available. Replacing previous understandings of the creative process as purely romantic/inspired self-expression is overdue. With a Constructivist concept of art as 'just' another form of work (mere meaning-making) the underlying problems of training¹¹ and practice begin to emerge. Skill in handling the plasticity of sound and image is built from *work* and, as Godard remarked, 'taxi drivers get to take their cars out every day, I only get to make a film once a year . . .' – and this from Europe's most successful experimentalist. Perhaps the recent convergence of broadcast and domestic/leisure video equipment, and the easy availability of the latter, will help to supersede this problem in the longer term.

¹¹ This is an area where I agree with Lovell's analysis; cf. for example an early panel discussion of the question: 'Training the independents', *Screen*, vol. 25, no. 6 (1984), pp. 5–16.



The middle of the road is a very dead end

Over a number of years the effect of the magnetic forces that pulled independent film practices towards dominant modes of representation became increasingly clear. They were driven both by the political and social imperative, but also the underlying economics – the need for constant sources of work. One can point to the continued existence and marginal resistance of some rare

operatives who are still concerned to explore the politics of form, but for a sizeable proportion of the sector even in the seventies concerns with communicating political content led to standard documentary formats. Many who had originally followed an inclination to experiment with form made an uninhibited move towards an audiences's pre-existent position and expectations.

These differences can be clearly seen in the comparison between an early *Eleventh Hour* series like *Pictures Of Women – Sexuality* (1984) and *Out* (1989–). The latter is certainly much more 'well-formed' and stylish, succeeding in reaching a wide audience beyond its primary concern with gay and lesbian politics and culture, but making little challenge to standard television form. In contrast, it often seemed that uneven experimentation in *Pictures of Women* undermined its avowedly political project.

Also the range of independents producing for the Department widened significantly across the years – this has led inexorably to a smaller and smaller proportion having the origins detailed above or carrying with them the burden of such ancient cultural histories. The slow dissolution of an independent community such as the IFA represented in the seventies must be, at least in part, also a result of the reconstruction of the sector as a profusion of small businesses, isolated and competitive.

A shift towards magazine programmes located in accessible parts of the schedule took place in the late eighties. *Visions* (1982–5) was replaced by the *Media Show* in 1987. *Critical Eye* (1990–), a highly controversial and successful series connects single polemical and analytical documentaries. Magazine shows like *Out*, the world's first networked gay and lesbian series, and *South* (1991), made by creative documentary filmmakers from Africa, Asia and Latin America, have all found mid-evening scheduling. Building on the earlier *People to People* (1983–7), a series of separately produced access programmes, a half-hour magazine programme of 'people's investigations' called *Free for All* was launched in 1991. Over a period of time the inevitable movement away from formal/representational difference took place as independent producers made shorter pieces for the new magazine formats.

Clearly this historical compromise carried the *Eleventh Hour* away from its origins (adjacent to ZDF's earlier *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel*¹²) where it was programming late night weekly singles in the tundra of the schedule. The slot title was dropped in 1988 as the enormously diverse range of material meant it retained little identifying meaning for most of the audience; however this also marked the erosion of any residual sense of collective identity for the sector itself. A gradual conceptual change took place as the idea of independent cinema on television merged into the idea of new television itself. In distinction to the ZDF example the *Eleventh Hour* programming had been more television orientated and

¹² Created in 1962 by Hajo Schedlich and continued from 1975 with Eckart Stein.

connected from the start: working with clusters, seasons and groups of programmes.

This is not the place for a full assessment but some of the effects of this shift in commissioning strategy towards television formats can be weighed against others: on the one hand, the new series connect with wider audiences and hopefully challenge them, extending their contact with effective contents and (relatively) creative forms; on the other hand, their populist compromise is part of a shift to the shorter attention span of television culture in general – aesthetically weaker material, and shorter-term aspirations for each individual work. There is little expectation that each item in a magazine programme will be viewed more than once, circulated in cinemas or achieve posterity in the archives. Of course one can question why the aspiration to the condition of longevity should be confined to cinema rather than television production. Certainly the magazines stop short of full integration in a consumable disposable culture, but – put crudely – any notion of the dialectic of form and content is eschewed for radicalized content utilizing close relatives of mainstream television forms.

A strong factor in this turn from earlier preoccupations with formal difference was that there had been no discernible resonance or support for the radical formal project from either audience or critics. This is not stated as a question of moralism or betrayal but objectively: this dimension of independent practice would not have become so weak and assailable if there had been evidence that it could connect with anyone at all.

The myth of the debate based film culture

The original concentration on discussion as a necessary and interactive context for film/tape viewing¹³ led to tentative experiments with placing a discursive frame around the programmes when screened on television: the first *Eleventh Hour* series, *Ireland the Silent Voices* (1983) and *Women on film* (1983). These gestural film intros and outros were soon abandoned as too clumsy, pedagogic and seemingly ineffective, although there has been occasional retention when necessary with difficult or distant material: *Video 1–5* (1985), *Dazzling Image* (1990) and *Vietnam Cinema* (1991) for instance.

Given its discursive origins one would have expected the independent sector's transition into television to be accompanied by intense and open cultural debate. In fact there has been minimal public argument. I know of no articles addressing the overall project of British independent film on/in television – describing the scope of it, dissecting the material, analyzing or criticizing even. Instead, over the years there has merely been a plethora of quickly produced

¹³ Stoneman, 'Film-related practice and the avant-garde'; 'South West Independent Film Tour' in *South West Film Directory* (Exeter: South West Arts, 1980); *The New Social Function of Cinema*. Catalogue: BFI Productions '79/80.

¹⁴ Jez Welsh, 'Resigning not resigned', *Independent Media*, no. 103 (1990), pp. 12-13.

¹⁵ The ICA day conference on the *Eleventh Hour* held in July 1983 was an early attempt to focus this interaction.

interviews, which have been useful for the exposition of information perhaps, but with the rare exception of Alan Lovell's piece and Jez Welsh's short article 'Resigning not resigned'¹⁴ there has been no published critical engagement with this version of the project of radical television. Indeed it is only when funding is finally withdrawn that a workshop member engages in debate.

There is some irony in this state of things, given the genesis of this area of production within a self-proclaimed 'debate based film culture' – perhaps too much was made of this at the time and, in retrospect, it can be seen to have been overstated. Furthermore there is sad continuity from the original lack of debate in the sector to its new situation. Theoretical discourse did not strengthen and consolidate practice. One would have thought that a lively critical film culture would have developed as especially essential in the transition to the new challenges of television.¹⁵

But 'the Sector' has never found a way to debate or criticize its own production (perhaps a recurrent symptom of this is the sense that a high proportion of programmes, from shorter avant-garde pieces to full-length feature films, are loose and over-extended). Although the term indulgent is perhaps too quickly used, the recurrent pattern is material edited too long. It is indeed rare to encounter work truncated and compressed into too tight a shape. The familiar anachronistic notion of the Artist interposes itself unhelpfully here and can be easily exacerbated by the Oedipal relation of oppositional independents to the institution of television.

Too often the angle of approach is that of a filmmaker using television money to make his or her next film rather than an engagement with the opportunity to extend their work to the specifics of a television space and ensure that the programme functions in that context. Different answers to the same question will be reached if thought through from the perspective of the audience. Of course there are endemic problems involved in the hypothetical and abstract projection of the idea of an audience but for any socially engaged audiovisual producer this consideration should be paramount.

The problem of independent *cinema on television* is revealed in the articulation of its distribution and exhibition. The specifics of separate traditions, of the cinema and television documentary, as well as fiction film, must not obscure the way in which cinema lives in, on and through television in the late twentieth century. Whatever our vestigial affections for the focused experience, public space and higher resolution images of cinema, the social experience of the audiovisual is now overwhelmingly in the home. After all, this is the reach and specificity of television: a subtitled, intellectually opaque series of interviews with Jacques Lacan transmitted at midnight is watched by 250,000 people while the most successful art-house cinema release is unlikely to reach more than 50,000.

Without an environment of dialectical discourse, discussions of audience and arguments about cinema and the balance between Politics and the Other (culture/imagination/desire) are either dominated by purely political criteria or drift off elsewhere. Once politics is introduced it can assume an ethical dominance over all the other dimensions of creative practice. The resolute hegemony of political criteria for a large proportion of the Independent Film and Video Department's output (the *Eleventh Hour* was once satirically dubbed The God Slot) stands in stark defiance of the general cultural shifts in Britain which, by the mid-eighties, had developed a mannerist, fashion-based and depoliticized culture with little sign of navigation by any political co-ordinates. Certainly the lack of debate about forms and strategies confirmed the lost chance to establish the necessary political/artistic equilibria. A culture of open discussion and self-reflexive argument is central to the project of developing imaginative and transformatory cultural forms and renewing 'old' agendas.

Horizons/orisons

This article articulates a partial vision of recent histories available from a personal position inside 'fortress television' and attempts to chart a phase of independent film that has flowed through a precarious set of broadcast opportunities. Standing back, one is struck by the considerable and extraordinary achievements of the decade. One of the pleasures of this area of audiovisual production is working intensely with images and sounds, films and programmes that are powerful, beautiful, moving. Necessarily, this article, based as it is upon a critique of structures rather than a celebration of the pleasures of the text, takes a more derogatory and negative tone.

What new generations of work exist beyond the edges of that vision, what are the possibilities of renewal at grassroots? Against the pessimistic mood of a debilitated *fin de millennium*, reeling from rapid shifts in the axes of politics and power, it seems necessary to reassert that the motor of change, social and audiovisual, is not the calcified tradition of received socialist dogma but the continuing perceived disparities of material conditions. There will be constant renewed contention over wealth and power, representation and control, as emancipatory forces persist and metamorphose in a landscape of change.

This article is not a recalcitrant apologia or a valediction – the process of renewal continues. The entry into television inevitably involves the erratic rhythm of the rise and fall of institutions and individuals. Nothing should be taken for granted; as Mikhail Gorbachev indicated in a reference to Heraclitus: 'as the ancient Greeks say, "everything flows, everything changes"'.¹⁶

¹⁶ Mikhail Gorbachev, *The Observer*, 5 June 1988. Cf. Charles H. Kahn (ed.), *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977; reprinted 1987).

Perhaps there will be a temporary reduction of scale of well-financed radical work as a result of the climactic changes taking place in European public-service television. In 1991 TVE in Spain reduced its workforce by ten per cent and its coproduction budget with Latin America by two thirds; *Das Kleine Fernsehspiel* was reduced from fifty to thirty-seven slots; the *Carre Noir* series on the French-Belgian station RTBF was discontinued; a financial crisis in Greek television temporarily suspended work with independent producers. Meanwhile the British government has constructed haphazard legislation designed to release market forces which themselves, in the longer term, will lead to new, more congenial and conservative configurations. This is a subtle, British way of reshaping broadcasting in an ideologically more amenable form. The relative balance of factual and entertainment programming on European television is shifting. The whole ecology of public-service television is threatened as a widespread process of global warming occurs!

It may be diminished and uneven, but there will still be significant scope for the renewal of innovative film and television making: imaginatively, politically and formally in whatever the institutional spaces that prevail. The most likely scenario is one in which transformation is uneven and diverse, continually modified by local conditions, local demands, expectations, resistances and compromises, the future still bearing the residual traces of the way it always was.

The Channel Four experience has barely scratched the surface of the possibilities of progressive and creative audiovisual production, of television programming, of democratic potential. 'Veniamo da lontano e andiamo lontano. . . .'¹⁷

¹⁷ Palmiro Togliatti, 'We've come a long way and we've a long way to go . . .', in *Geschichte der Nacht* (*Histories of the Night*, ZDF, 1979).

Sri Lankan family melodrama: a cinema of primitive attractions

LALEEN JAYAMANNE

I think a truly national cinema will emerge from the much abused form of melodrama when truly serious and considerate artists bring the pressure of their entire intellect upon it.

Ritwik Ghatak¹

I look forward to receiving your completed scenario. I hope it will contain pathos, thrills, well-timed and well-calculated comedy situations, intermingled with the other emotions, which I am sure every large picture requires.

William Fox to Murnau²

1 Ritwik Ghatak, *Filmfare* (Bombay: Vikas, 1967) p. 11.

2 William Fox, letter to F.W. Murnau quoted in Lotte H. Eisner, *Murnau* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1965), p. 183.

The much abused form melodrama is, of course, now critically respectable, thanks to the work of scholars and critics who have explored its centrality in popular culture (some have argued for its importance even within the tradition of high modernism). Despite this critical valorization of melodrama though, in reality there is a hierarchy of the popular – Murnau's *Sunrise* (1927), Sirkean melodrama, the films of Fassbinder and, closer to home, Ghatak, are at the top end of a critical paradigm. My concern here is with a form of melodrama that is critically disreputable, the Sri Lankan melodrama which has been castigated for decade after decade by local film critics and intelligentsia committed to the development of a 'truly indigenous national cinema'.

Underlying virtually all this criticism is the implication that because a generic formula was copied from Indian cinema (Tamil and Hindi) it is alien and given its mythical formulaic structure, it is unable to express/represent what is perceived to be Sri Lankan reality.

I want to disagree with these assumptions with the hope of salvaging the maligned formula of the Sri Lankan melodrama for a different practice. Elsewhere I have argued that in the period from 1947 to 1979 there were basically two types of films being made in Sri Lanka, genre films and departure-from genre films, in the social-realist model. Unlike Indian cinema, then (from which it derives its generic model), Sri Lankan cinema had only one genre – what I will call the family melodrama.³

The formula (*vattoruva*)⁴

B.A.W. Jayamanne, whose stage play *Kadauna Poronduwa* ('Broken Promise') was made into the first Sinhalese film in 1947 (it was in fact shot and processed in South India) described the structure of the formula as follows:

the duration of the film had to be two-and-a-half hours. One hour of this had to be given to scenes with dialogue, half an hour to songs (about ten songs), another half hour given to silent background scenes, with an interval of fifteen minutes.⁵

In this comment he does not account for the remaining fifteen minutes, but the plan gives some indication of how the structure of the film was conceptualized. Though it is not as detailed as William Fox's letter to Murnau, one factor common to both pieces of writing is the understanding that a popular film has to have certain ingredients, whether it be 'pathos', 'thrills', 'comic situations' or situations that generate 'emotions' or songs (which are always accompanied by dance or movement) and background 'scenes' of visual interest. These films develop not from the interiority of character-driven plot but rather from a set of ingredients around which a narrative is to be generated. This way of working is similar though not identical to G. Melies's method at the beginning of cinema:

As for the scenario, the 'fable', the 'story', I only worried about it at the very end. I can assert that the scenario so executed was of no importance whatsoever because my sole aim was to use it as a 'pretext' for the 'staging', for the 'tricks' or for picturesque tableaux.⁶

Such statements by early practitioners of cinema indicate that this approach is not a retarded third-world oddity but an older filmic economy. Though the earliest Sinhala films were made well within the era of sound they are based on an economy that has much in common with the conception of cinema prevalent in the silent era.

Though the Sri Lankan genre film always tells a story, its great investment in the act of staging picturesque tableaux and trick

3 Unpublished Ph.D. thesis on 'The positions of women in the Sri Lankan cinema, 1947–1979', University of New South Wales, Australia, 1981.

4 The Sinhalese term *vattoru* comes from traditional medical discourse. It is the prescription which tabulates the proportion of herbs and other ingredients needed to prepare traditional medicine.

5 B.A.W. Jayamanne, quoted by H. Perera in 'Early Sinhala cinema' *Cinemamarupa* (1962), p. 5.

6 G. Melies as quoted by Andre Gaudreault in 'Theatricality, narrativity and trickality: re-evaluation of the cinema of Georges Melies', *Journal of Popular Film and TV*, no. 15 (1987), p. 114.

effects makes it impervious to value judgements based on taste and/or nationalistic rhetoric. One can safely assert that the melodramatic form of the Sinhalese cinema is a vital one – it continues to attract people in the fourth decade of its existence in Sri Lanka. Wherein lies this vitality is a question that has fascinated me for over a decade. Depending on the methodological tools at my disposal, I come up with different answers, and I am returning now to this genre from a rather different perspective than I had ten years ago when, under the influence of British *Screen* theory, I viewed this melodramatic structure/form with some reservation. This was due to the way in which the twin operations of 'narrative' and 'spectacle' were conceptualized in the 1970s. The psychoanalytic paradigm made it impossible to think of the genre outside a mode of guilty pleasures.

If one forgets psychoanalysis for a moment and starts from an idea of modernity and modernization and what this might mean in the context of the genesis of a national cinema and the creation of a new public sphere, then it is possible to develop analytic tools that can salvage the abused genre. The formula film can be divided into its narrative operations and its scenic operations. The narrative economy of this type of cinema is characterized by 'prodigality' – arbitrary rupture of continuity and causality, and the proliferation of minor plots, characters and events to such a dizzying degree that one forgets the main action line. The term 'prodigality' also refers to the non-parsimonious expenditure of energy characteristic of these films. Though the plots can be called 'episodic', the economy is extravagantly wasteful.

These scenic operations can be thought through with the help of a set of terms developed by Tom Gunning, the historian of silent cinema. What he has done over a series of suggestive articles is to situate early cinema of the period 1895–1906 (the so-called 'primitive' era) within the context of modernization and the concomitant transformation of the human sensorium. Gunning calls early cinema, a cinema of 'attractions', and its effect an aesthetic of shock and astonishment. According to him and other historians, this silent cinema is one which is prior to the hegemony of narrative film. Thus it is characterized more by a desire to 'show' something than to tell, and is an unashamedly exhibitionist cinema, unlike the later voyeurist classical mode (in Hollywood). Concomitant with this propensity to display views is an ability to solicit the viewer directly, signified by such devices as frontal composition, the recurring look at the camera, and gratuitous displays of cinematic trick effects. This is a cinema that delights in its visibility, and conceives of its impact on the viewer as a series of visual shocks and thrills.

Gunning points out how the term 'attraction' refers both to nineteenth-century popular entertainment such as fair-ground amusements parks, magic, variety theatre and circus, and to Sergei

Eisenstein's radicalization of the concept in his theatrical filmic and theoretical work. He reminds us of the enthusiasm of the early avant garde for the emerging mass culture at the turn of the century and of their fascination with the new kinds of stimuli provided for an audience not acculturated to the traditional high arts, an audience created by processes of modernization and urbanization. This conjunction of a new audience (largely working-class) with a new set of perceptions, gave a utopian dimension to the creation of a new public sphere. The aesthetic of contemplative absorption necessary for the 'consumption' of bourgeois high art was challenged by such an exhibitionist confrontation with the viewer. The fact that film was first an attraction within vaudeville aligned it with this mode of perception both structurally and materially. 'Attraction', according to Gunning, is then an aggressive and sufficiently autonomous peak moment in a performance that is visually striking.⁷

Gunning insists that though the concept of attraction and the pleasures peculiar to it are different from those of story-telling, it is not opposed to the narrative impulse.

In fact the cinema of attraction does not disappear with the dominance of narrative but rather goes underground both into certain avant-garde practices and as part of narrative films, more evident in some genres (musicals) than in others.⁸

The exhibitionist scenography of the cinema of attraction is characterized by a temporal operation fascinated by the instant rather than by developing situation. What it is after is the fleeting, intense moment whether it be a pleasurable thrill or a thrilling repulsion. The early films were largely one-shot films where editing was not significant. A visual economy of this sort is not interested in causality and verisimilitude. But even in the more complex work of Melies and E. S. Porter where editing does have a function, the principle of attraction, the series of relatively autonomous moments, can still be said to operate.⁹

Spectacular moments/denigrated attractions

Across the forty-odd year history of the Sri Lankan cinema certain scenes or attractions recur with absolute predictability: love scenes, with songs and dances, night club scenes, wedding scenes, lullaby scenes, crying scenes with songs, fight scenes, rape scenes, murder scenes and deathbed scenes. These scenes are so identified with the formula film that on occasion one hears a director proclaim his [sic] intention of making a 'serious film' (which really means a departure from the formula) by saying that there won't be a single song in it. Though the formula film always tells a story, its narrative economy is prodigal as I mentioned earlier. It is, in this respect, quite

⁷ Tom Gunning, 'An aesthetic of astonishment: early film and the (in)credulous spectator', *Art & Text*, no. 34 (1989), pp. 31–45.

⁸ Tom Gunning, "'The cinema of attraction': early film, its spectator and the avant-garde", *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, nos 3–4 (1986), p. 64.

⁹ Tom Gunning, "'Primitive" cinema – a frame-up? or the trick's on us', *Cinema Journal*, vol. 28, no. 2 (1988), pp. 3–12.

different from the tightly knit narrative economy of classical Hollywood cinema. This feature of the formula film probably derives from the variety-theatre format of the (*nurti*) plays that were first adapted to the screen.

The mandatory scenes of attraction are what make local melodramas so 'tasteless' to their critics, in comparison with the realism of western melodrama. I do not want to argue that the formula films are great cinema (most of them are very poor both technically and conceptually), but I do think that the structure, the films' formal properties, are an immensely valuable resource that could be put to better use. The prodigal narrative economy and the mandatory scenes conceived as attractions (the repertoire of which can be changed) can work together in tension, in a montage of attractions, even. Audience appreciation of such a flexible structure, which permits the shifting of visual and narrative registers, is striking, and the formula's ability to effect instant displacement between reality and fantasy could certainly open the social field to cinematic refiguring.

The love scene with its songs and dances is a peak 'autonomous' moment – the image of fulfilled desires. It is an enchanted space/time created by cinematic magic. The change of locations and costumes in a single scene, and the shots of the lovers driving in motor cars in scenic locations, are equally fantasies of social mobility. In the very early films these scenes were shot in long-take, while more recent films (influenced by rock clips) use a fragmented editing style, but, in both, the lovers are conscious of performing not only for each other but also for the viewer. (This is especially so with the female performer, who looks directly at the viewer, soliciting her/his gaze.)

Such moments, organized around the pure 'visibility' of material and personal felicity, are simple allegories of love transcending class, the recurring plot motif in the Sri Lankan cinema. They offer a series of intense scenes (where the narrative logic of before and after does not operate) that can be expanded up to a duration of two to three minutes. Unlike scenes of kissing, and sexuality, which usually have a narrative trajectory leading to a climax and resolution of tension, these love scenes figure a highly formalized 'foreplay' that extends time in a non-climactic duration. They are the felicitous moments in otherwise catastrophic narratives of class-crossed lovers. Several of the new directors of the 1980s have been particularly respectful of this dimension of the popular cinema and have explored its utopian impulse in darker, more dystopian registers – see, for example, Vasantha Obeyesekere's *Palangatiyo* ('Grasshoppers', 1979) and *Dadayama* ('The Hunt', 1983).

The fight scenes (low-tech Karate-type fighting) have a peculiar attraction because the sound is post dubbed, quite often out of synch, and very loud. There is a visceral intensity to these scenes on

both the audio and visual registers. That they seem incredible is not the point; for the aficionado (still largely the urban working class) such attractions provide moments of corporeal engagement and magical possibility.

The death-bed scene, where a parent extracts a vow from a child to renounce his/her desire in favour of being a dutiful child, is also constructed as a frontal composition, just like the happy endings, where all concerned gather together as though posing for a photograph. The former scene figures a moment of irreversible temporal change in order to render palpable one of the key themes of the family melodrama – the conflict between duty and desire, between loyalty to the family and the expression of individualistic values. Though such scenes are related to the narrative they also hold and expand climactic moments to increase their emotional effect. Their duration (usually in long-take) extends well beyond the needs of the plot. If the death scene thus provides a shock that fissures the seeming unity of the family, the ‘family photograph’ affirms its wholeness.

Rape scenes are always allegories of class and power in Sri Lankan cinema. Usually a rich man rapes a poor woman. She gets raped when she leaves her home, usually looking for employment. It is in this figure of the woman that the major binary schema of the genre’s mythical structure is articulated:

urban	rural
rich	poor
westernized	traditional
bad	good

In *Pitisara Kella* (‘Village Girl’, 1953) by S. Wimalaweera, a young, poor village girl loves a poor village boy. But the girl’s mother orders her to give up her true love and marry a rich man who has connections with the city. After their marriage he impregnates and abandons her. She accuses her mother of destroying her life. Their house catches fire and the mother dies in the flames thus necessitating the daughter to move to the city. After an initial period of hardship she becomes a famous dancer in the city and is westernized in manner. This narrative of the pressures of modernization on a woman who cannot now depend on marriage as a means of economic survival is, however, elaborated within a moral frame. The woman’s passage into modernity, signified by the city, is fraught with danger (she is solicited to be a prostitute but chooses the career of dancer instead) and she herself becomes urban, rich, westernized, and bad. In a key attraction she addresses her own image in the mirror in her dressing room, smoking, taking a posture signifying a hardened westernized sophistication and says ‘you were once a village lass but now you a dancing girl’.

The shock or thrill of such a scene does not depend on narcissistic

rapture but on an image which invokes a memory of a difficult process of transformation. It is quite usual for the image then to step out of the mirror and address the addressee in a multiplied series of attractions. At the level of spectacle this is a rare 'attraction' of a woman's economic mastery (she is no longer an abject victim) and yet at the narrative level she stands condemned. This is achieved by the ploy of the unfaithful husband's desire to return to his wife. The wife, no longer a docile village lass, drives her husband to murder, by telling him that the only condition on which she will come back to him is if he brings her 8,000 rupees. In his desperation to return he kills her manager and attempts to steal the money in his keeping. The modern woman's economic independence is thus seen as a desire for money which leads to catastrophe. After her husband is imprisoned the wife renounces her career and uses her ill-gotten wealth to become a giver of alms to the poor. While engaged in this culturally valorized activity she meets her true love, at the foot of a giant Buddha statue. The film ends, if not with a wedding, at least with hope, the affirmation of traditional values.

Two attractions prior to the scene with the mirror also show the prodigality of the narrative structure. One is a comic routine of a village couple come to town. The comedy is generated by their rustic appearance and response to the city, as well as by a routine of cuckolded husband and shrewish wife. The husband terminates this episode with his line 'the village has light, Colombo is dark'. The other is a scene of a transvestite performer dancing to a transfixed crowd on the street. There is no narrative motivation in terms of causality in these extended attractions but they can be read as scenes where consensual assumptions about gender roles are disturbed, presented as *city* attractions to enjoy but not condone. But because the main character is not present in either of these scenes, the sense of their arbitrariness in terms of plot logic hovers in one's mind, especially if one is not accustomed to this narrative economy. The modern woman in the film also transforms her gender identity, but in a more sombre manner. The absence of the family (or its destruction) is directly related to the woman's need for independence, and the city figures as an ambivalent locus for this and for loss (of virtue).

The director of this film, S. Wimalaweera, was one of the earliest ideologues of an 'authentically indigenous *Sinhala* cinema'. Thematically, such cinema calls to women to return to traditional virtues and pieties, and yet through its 'attractions' it also, perhaps unwittingly, suggests the attractions of modernity.

My attempt to rethink the aesthetic/signifying viability of the formula (its financial viability is unquestionable) has a historical urgency in the context of the current problems in the film industry exacerbated by, among other factors, the introduction of television

and video in the early 1980s. One of Sri Lanka's leading actresses and a star in Pakistani cinema, Anoja Weerasingha, has the following defence to make of the formula film:

I would say that the film industry in Sri Lanka today exists as it does only due to the dedication and devotion of those who are involved in it. One of the reasons why I don't like to attack the commercial cinema is because most of these films are produced by persons involved in the film industry themselves. What happened was that the outside producers abandoned the film industry as a bad investment. The film artistes stepped in. It is we who have preserved the film industry in this country, it is we who have not allowed it to die, even if it was by making copies of Hindi films. It was a matter of life and death. Nobody asks us why we are making copies of Hindi films. They only attack us for copying them. Today, once more the film industry is beginning to flourish. There can be no 'film as art' if the film industry doesn't exist as an industry. If the film industry is destroyed, there can be no 'art' cinema. So we have to work out a balance between commercial and artistic films. There are hundreds of people who are dependent on the film industry for their survival – from the light boy on the camera crew, to the toilet attendant in the cinema. We have to safeguard their livelihood. While giving people what they want, we can also begin to introduce them to something different.¹⁰

10 Anoja Weerasingha, *Framework*, 'Special issue on Sri Lankan Cinema', no. 37 (1989), p. 98.

The cogent position argued for here by Anoja Weerasingha goes against the dominant rhetoric on the Sinhala cinema, which declares that its future depends on its emancipation from Indian generic influence.

My defence of the formula, based on the belief that it is still underexploited as a set of formal/structural possibilities, could work as a corollary to Weerasingha's argument. In fact the more astute film directors have not departed too far from the formula for fear of losing audience and career. The work of a director like D. Pathiraja, who began the new wave of young critical cinema in the 1970s, is instructive. While his earlier work such as *Eyadan Loku Lamayek* ('She is a Grown-up Girl', 1975) and *Bambaru Avith* ('The Wasps are Here', 1978) contained elements of the formula (songs), his last film *Soldadu Unnahe* ('Old Soldier', 1981) was a rigorous departure from the conventions of the family melodrama. The reasons for the box-office failure and hesitant critical response to 'Old Soldier' were, I think, intimately related to its eschewal of both action (narrative development) and attractions (spectacle specific to the family melodrama), in favour of a cinema of stasis. This is, perhaps, our only rigorously modernist film – it contains no family, not even a viable couple, only a group of four social outcasts. But as there are no venues for independent production and exhibition in Sri

Lanka, box-office failure also means the end of a career, and Pathiraja's importance as a pioneer of a new critical cinema in Sri Lanka makes his long silence since 'Old Soldier' lamentable. The question of how innovation can be effected in the context of a popular cinema without alienating its audience remains a pressing one.

The 'hidden' gender in *Yellow Earth*

MARY ANN FARQUHAR

Yellow Earth (*Huang Tudi*, 1984) is regarded as a pioneering work in modern Chinese cinema. It focused international attention on the burgeoning Chinese film industry; it influenced other young directors, known as 'the fifth generation', whose collective output in the eighties is a byword for the new exploratory Chinese cinema. One of these directors, Tian Zhuangzhuang, said in 1986:

If it wasn't for *Yellow Earth*, then there wouldn't have been the whole debate about film aesthetics . . . [the film] represents the future of Chinese cinema now.¹

Tian's point is that *Yellow Earth* is 'different'.² It was this difference which initially alienated and challenged Chinese audiences. For decades they were habituated to stereotyped storylines with overt political messages. But *Yellow Earth* emphasizes imagery over plot, symbolism and song over dialogue, and ambiguity over explicit didactic function. The director, Chen Kaige, put it most simply: 'a single word sums up the essence of the film's style: "concealment" (*cáng*)'.³

How, then, does an audience 'read' a film which consciously 'conceals' its meanings. Esther Yau uses western analyses of the narrative strands in the film but concludes that this reading does 'not locate *Yellow Earth's* difference from other interesting Chinese films made during the same period'⁴ (my emphasis). Throughout the article, she tantalizes one with allusions to alternative Chinese, that is, Daoist elements, which undermine her 'western analysis'. She refers to Chen Kaige's quote (it is actually a mis-quote) from the Daoist classic, *Dao De Jing*, on the film's aesthetics:

1 Yang Ping, 'A director who is trying to change the audience: a chat with young director, Tian Zhuangzhuang' in Chris Berry (ed.), *Perspectives on Chinese Cinema*, trans Chris Berry, (London: British Film Institute, 1991), p. 127.

2 Ibid., p. 127.

3 Chen Kaige, 'Xiwangpian' in Zhongguo Dianying Fanying Gongsi (ed.), *Huang Tudi*, (Beijing: Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe, 1984), p. 2.

4 Esther C. M. Yau, 'Yellow Earth: a western analysis of a non-western text', *Film Quarterly*, vol. XLI, no. 2 (1987-8), p. 32.

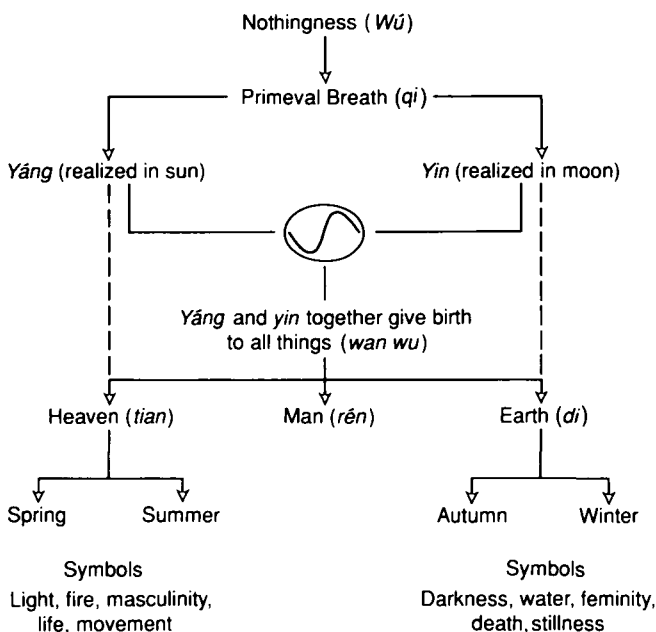
5 Ibid., pp. 24, 32. Quoted in Kaige, 'Xiwangpian', p. 2. The quote is from Chapter 42 of the *Dao De Jing* and the first line should read 'Great music has the faintest (x) sound'. See Paul Carus, *Lao-Tze's Tao Teh King, Chinese-English* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1898), pp. 73, 119, 308.

6 Ni Zhen, 'Huang tudi' zhi hou' in Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe (ed.), *Tansuo Dianying Ji*, (Shanghai: Shanghai Wenyi Chubanshe, 1987), p. 196.

Great music has no sound (*Da yin wu sheng*).
The great image has no form (*Da xiang wu xing*).⁵

From Chen Kaige's own perspective, the film may be read through key symbols and principles of Daoist cosmology, which traditionally regulated and explained the human and natural worlds and their inter-relationships, and constitute the informing philosophy for traditional Chinese art. Indeed, the natural world dominates this film. As one commentator wrote: 'the main characters are not just people, but the yellow earth itself from which the Chinese people emerge'.⁶

We could schematize the *Dao*, or way of life, concealed in *Yellow Earth* as follows:



The narrative focuses on human relationships with each other and with nature, that is, heaven, man, earth, and the seasons. As Yau suggests, the narrative strands are inadequate to explain the film's meaning. The deeper meaning is embedded in visual images of sky and sun (male), and earth and water (female) which surround and determine the human stories within a hidden Daoist framework.

The two key principles of Chinese cosmology are *yang* (the male principle) and *yin* (the female principle). The superficial storyline is a Communist literary cliché: a Party cadre comes to a backward rural area in Shaanxi in 1939 to collect folksongs and re-work them for the anti-Japanese war effort.⁷ He represents the possibilities of revolution and action and so belongs to the world of *yang*, which in

7 See the synopsis of the story from Ronin Film.

8 Kaige, 'Xiwangpian', p. 2.

Daoist cosmology corresponds to heaven, light, fire, masculinity, life and movement. But the film unwraps the package to reveal the hidden world of *yin*, the female principle realized in earth, darkness, water, death and stillness. The dominant images in the film are earth and water, the yellow earth of the title and the Yellow River, which nurtures, destroys and indeed symbolizes the Chinese people, according to Chen Kaige.⁸ The film ends with death, the drowning of the only female character, Cuiqiao, and crop failure through drought. The symbolic world of *yin*, the hidden gender, challenges the bright, active world of *yang* and, by inference, proclaims cosmological disharmony.

The hidden structure of *Yellow Earth*: *Yin*

Yellow Earth is adapted from an earlier story. Chen Kaige and members of the film crew went to northern Shaanxi (Shaanbei) in the heartland of China for background research. There they confronted the 'mother' of Chinese civilization, the middle reaches of the Yellow River. 'Early one morning, we saw an old man drawing a pail of water from the river's edge; from that moment we knew how the film would be and how to write it. For thousands of years, people have drawn water from the Yellow River. . . . In the film, the person who embodies this ideal strength is the main female character, Cuiqiao . . . the river which drowned her is the same river which nurtured her.'⁹

9 Ibid.

Whether intentionally or not Kaige sees the river as a mother and substitutes a young girl for the old man as the symbol of Chinese civilization. The feminine emphasis in the film is central to its conception, as well as its structure.

But *yang* and *yin* in Chinese myths are not the exclusive property of one sex. Rather, they are principles manifest in all things (*wan wu*), and cosmic order, including its repercussions on the natural and human worlds, depends on maintaining a harmonious relationship.¹⁰ Thus, the two rituals in the film, the (*Yan'an*) Drum Dance in its original form and the Rain ceremony, for example, are rites which placate the gods and so ward off drought and pestilence. The *yang/yin* structure of the film is not one of fixed gender confrontation, or simple patriarchy, but one of disharmonious relationships.

10 Michael R. Saso, *Taoism and the Rite of Cosmic Renewal* (Washington: Washington State University Press, 1972), pp. 8–15.

The time span of the film supports this view. The film begins in early spring and ends in summer. Throughout China, the lunar year and its festivals and rituals were divided into two periods. The first (spring and summer) was dominated by the principle *yang*, ruled by heaven, and was the period of planting and growth of the crops. The second (autumn and winter) was dominated by the principle *yin*, ruled by earth and water, and was the period of harvest and rest.¹¹

11 Ibid., p. 30.

12 'Huang Tudi' (Dianying Wancheng Taiben)' henceforth referred to as Film Script, in Chubanshe (ed.), *Tansuo Dianying Ji*, p. 189.

13 Charles A. S. Williams, *Encyclopaedia of Chinese Symbolism and Art Motifs*, (New York: Julian Press, Inc., 1931), p. 131.

14 Film Script, pp. 110-11.

15 Ibid., p. 103.

16 Ibid., p. 112.

The action of the film takes place when *yang* has been reborn and reaches it zenith: early spring (*chu chun*) in Scene 1; the beginning of summer in the fourth month when Cuiqiao is unwillingly married out to an old man in Scenes 44 to 52; summer in Scene 56 just prior to Cuiqiao's death; high summer in Scene 67 where the director notes that it is to be played slowly 'to increase the feeling of the molten heat' of the sun (in Chinese *taiyang* or 'great *yang*').¹² This leads into the second last scene where the all-male peasants pray for rain to the Dragon King, the traditional 'symbol of the productive force of moisture, that is of spring, when by means of genial rains and storms all nature renewed itself'.¹³ The imagery is stark: a fiery sun and no water. As with the superficial story noted in the introduction, *yang* predominates but, in a reversal of the symbol, brings not life but death and drought.

The festivals and rituals in the film support this analysis. The first, in Scenes 13 and 14, is a wedding ceremony and the songs suggest that this joining of a man and woman is a natural and happy event.

Pairs of carp drift in the stream,
Pairs of goats run on the hillside,
Pairs of plump pigs root in the trough,
Fortune was smiling
On this newly-wed couple.¹⁴

The pairing of natural and human images is a feature of Shaanbei folksongs and emphasizes the links between nature and people's lives in rural China. But Kaige's notes in the film-script state that 'feudal weddings were happy on the outside but tragic on the inside' and this is shown, not by explicit statement, but by the colours: red for happiness and *yang*, and black and white for unhappiness which is the colour of the men's clothes.¹⁵ The bridegroom is thirty years older than the bride and Cuiqiao, a spectator, sees her own future as a young wife of an old man prefigured in these scenes. Her piteous songs in the next scene suggest natural and unseasonal abnormalities and then focus on her own situation:

The ice in the Yellow River won't melt in June,
It is my father who forces me to marry,
As no grain is round like the pea,
So girls' lives are the worst you can see,
Poor girls, girls, oh.¹⁶

The second festival is Cuiqiao's own wedding. She has pleaded with Gu Qing to get permission to allow her to go to Yan'an and so escape her fate by trading her wedding shoes for straw army sandals. But he returns too late. Whereas the earlier wedding concentrated on its social ritual, this wedding focuses on Cuiqiao's own misery, particularly on her wedding night where all we see is a rough peasant male hand lifting Cuiqiao's veil and then her face full of

17 Ibid., p. 185.

18 Ibid., Chen Kaige's notes, p. 179.

19 Yau, 'Yellow Earth: a western analysis of a non-western text', p. 29.

20 Film Script, p. 193.

21 Yau, 'Yellow Earth: A western analysis of a non-western text', p. 29.

fear. When Cuiqiao next appears she is running away to Yan'an and it is the first time she is explicit to others about her own life: 'I am desperate (*ku*)', she says to her brother, Hanhan.¹⁷ For Cuiqiao, who drowns crossing the river to Yan'an, her wedding is all tragedy and no happiness – it brings death.

The third ritual, in Scene 53, is the Drum Dance at Yan'an. It is full of movement and vitality and is the only 'lively' (*dong*) scene in the whole film.¹⁸ It is also all-male and celebrates the vigour of *yang* and soldiers off to war.

The fourth ritual is the Rain Prayer ceremony at the end of the film following Cuiqiao's death. Yau claims that these all-male scenes, like the Drum Dance, celebrate 'the strength and attraction of *yang*'.¹⁹ The prayers to the Dragon King for water are, I would argue, depicted much more ambiguously. Again, Chen's notes show that the Rain Prayer sequence is to be played as a contrast to the Drum Dance; 'the Drum Dance is full of movement, the Rain Prayers are full of quietness'.²⁰ The prayers are for rain to the Dragon King, symbol of moisture and sustenance or *yin*, as already noted. Thus the Rain Prayer scene is pervaded with sadness, quietness, death, the absence of water and the absence of women, all characteristics (in their presence or absence) of *yin*. The film ends with dearth of *yin*, not strength of *yang* and crop failure through drought, not growth and maturation.

The human drama in *Yellow Earth* reflects this cosmic and seasonal disorder and the dearth of *yin*. The characters are Gu Qing, the Party cadre and the three members of the poor peasant family he stays with: the father, Cuiqiao, his twelve year old daughter and Hanhan, his young son. All the males are kindly, Gu Qing representing revolution and hope, the father embodying an age-old patriarchy and Hanhan offering a silent empathy to Cuiqiao. The plot follows Cuiqiao's story and reveals her feelings through the songs she sings which 'fill the film's sound track – musical signifiers narrating the sadness and beauty of *yin*'.²¹

Songs and *Yin* in *Yellow Earth*

The collection and re-writing of folksongs is central to Chinese Communist literary theory. It was called 'new wine in old bottles' and writers were to take traditional popular literature and art and re-write them with a revolutionary content. In this way the concealed folk tradition was to be made articulate and revolutionary. Chinese audiences would be fully aware of this context as revolutionary popular literature is the cornerstone of Mao Zedong's famous 'Yan'an Talks on Literature and Art' (1942).

The discussion in the fields between Gu Qing and the peasant father sets the framework:

Father: What are you doing here?
 Gu: Collecting Shaanbei folksongs.
 Father: Sour songs?
 Gu: Can you sing?
 Father: Only when I'm in the mood.
 Gu: There are hundreds and thousands of folksongs here. Can you remember them?
 Father: I can because times are hard. Why are you collecting them?
 Gu: When we find new songs we put new words to them. Let them be sung in the army by girls of Cuiqiao's age. People will know why we are suffering, why women are beaten and why workers and farmers need a revolution. When the Eighth Route Army hear the songs they fight the Japanese more bravely.²²

²² Film Script, p. 140.

Shaanbei folksongs are called 'sour songs' (*suanqu*), a term which emphasizes the hardship of peasant life in this region. The film, as artistic artefact itself, is set in the formative period of Chinese Communist artistic theory and practice and questions its effectiveness.

The initial two songs are sung by males. The first is a Communist stereotype about the bitter life of itinerant workers, laid off during the cold winter months. The second, partly quoted above, is a traditional wedding song. Thus, the first two songs introduce the world of *yang*, the need for revolution contrasting to feudal patriarchy in a rural setting.

The audience soon discovers, however, that there is a beautiful singer among the girls because Gu Qing asks Cuiqiao if she knows her. Gu Qing, in fact, suspects but never discovers that the girl is Cuiqiao herself. In ideological terms Gu Qing never utilizes the region's most important resource. It remains hidden from the Party, but not from the audience who hears Cuiqiao's songs sung for herself alone. At one stage she sings:

The cadre living with us doesn't know I can sing,
 Like the eighteen green willow shoots,
 I have my own stories to tell,
 But I don't know, I don't know how to tell him,
 Poor girls.²³

²³ Ibid., p. 145.

The father, son and Cuiqiao finally sing for Gu Qing; the men's songs are public and about feudal marriages but the content of Cuiqiao's 'public' song has been influenced by Gu Qing's message of revolution and escape. Whereas her sad, secret 'sour' songs are about her own inner feelings (*xinshi*) and powerlessness, this public song is a plea to save her but she realizes that 'folksongs will save no-one, not even me'.²⁴ She dies singing the revolutionary song that Gu Qing has taught her and Hanhan:

²⁴ Ibid., p. 170.

25 Ibid., pp. 186-7.

With sickle, axe and hoe,
We open a road for peasants to go,
Upon the wall the spotted rooster flies,
Only the Communist Party can save the people's lives.²⁵

She disappears in the middle of the word, 'Communist'. Hence, the male world of revolutionary ideology brings disappointment and death to Cuiqiao. This is further reinforced by the songs at the end of the film. The first is the song at the Rain ceremony, which pleads with the Dragon King, not the Party, to 'save the people's lives'. The second is a repeat of Cuiqiao's last 'revolutionary' song, disembodied between parched earth and empty sky, between the two major symbols of *yin* and *yang*. The song, imagery and symbolism leave a powerful impression of the emptiness and irrelevance of Party promises to ordinary people. In practice, but not in theory, the Party (Gu Qing) does not listen to the people (Cuiqiao's songs) even though 'the mass line' was yet another corner-stone of Communist ideology.

Cuiqiao's songs are, therefore, the hidden component of the traditionally submerged folk tradition. Scene 21 is an example of Cuiqiao's hidden inner world where the cinematography and the sounds combine to deepen the feeling of stillness and darkness, qualities of *yin*. A single light shows Cuiqiao's face as she sits singing softly while she spins in the night. The whirring of the spinning wheel, a symbol of women's work for centuries, is the background accompaniment.

Pairs of pigeons fly across the sky,
Who is it that I miss the most?
None but that mother of mine.
Worthless as the melons in the valley, the gourds on the hill,
I don't want to marry so I was beaten,
Beaten, oh poor girls.
Like a square purse embroidered but round inside,
If I don't marry my life may be bitter, but to me more sweet,
The spotted rooster sits on the window sill,
But I have no-one to tell, to tell, of these miseries,
Oh, poor girls!²⁶

26 Ibid., p. 126.

In the notes in the film script, Cuiqiao is not desperately sad, perhaps because sadness is her everyday life. She listens to see she is alone but this is played ambiguously, perhaps she wants someone to hear. For such a poor peasant girl, 'songs are her dreams'.²⁷

27 Ibid., p. 126.

Cuiqiao's loneliness is echoed in references to the other women in her family, dead or married out. Her mother has died. Cuiqiao has been engaged since childhood and the betrothal money used to pay her mother's funeral costs and her brother's engagement. She is financially, not just culturally, trapped. Her elder sister has been

married out; because she was beaten she ran away to her maternal home but was sent back to her husband. The lives of these women show Cuiqiao her own fate.

The father's song, sung for Gu Qing, generalizes these particular women's lives.

In the month of January, her big eyes open wide,
Her crescent brows are like bending bows,
You'll be saddened by the story I will tell,
Engaged at thirteen,
Married at fourteen,
At the age of fifteen, she became a widow,
For three days loudly she cried,
And everyone sighs,
For three days quietly she cries,
Then she drowns herself in the well.²⁸

Again, the song foretells Cuiqiao's early marriage and drowning. There is no escape except suicide for women in feudal China. Liberation and Yan'an offer the only alternative.

Hanhan's song is also about marriage from the girl's point of view but in this case the girl is married out to a child bride-groom, a 'wet-a-bed'.

When the pomegranate flowers, the leaves start showing,
My mother sold me off, without me knowing.
All I ever asked for was a good man to wed,
But what I've ended up with was a little wet-a-bed.
When you pee, I'll also pee,
Curse you, you can pee with me.
In spring next year, when flowers blossom red,
Frogs will start croaking under the bed.
Right to the East Ocean flows a river of pee,
To the Dragon King's palace under the sea.
The Dragon King laughs as he hears the pee:
'This little wet-a-bed is in the same line as me.'²⁹

Whereas Cuiqiao's songs are lingering and yearning and the father's is fatalistic, Hanhan's song is ribald and hilarious. Nevertheless, the men in the family understand and sympathize with women's lives, offering different perspectives on Cuiqiao's own sadness. They are not enemies but both feudal and revolutionary societies 'have their rules' (*you gui ju*), and both societies in this particular film offer Cuiqiao no escape. She does, however, *try* to escape and it is this which Chen Kaige says gives the film 'hope'.³⁰ But it is a very slim hope. In the end, everything soft, nurturing and maternal has disappeared or died.

Thus the men's songs wrap around the songs about women's lives and all these songs reverberate in the silence and vastness of the

²⁸ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 147-8; translated in G. Barmé and J. Minford *Seeds of Fire: Chinese Voices of Conscience* (Hong Kong: Far Eastern Economic Review, 1986), pp. 256-7.

³⁰ Kaige, 'Xiwangpian', p. 2.

yellow earth and sky which surround the human lives from birth to death. It is this silence and emptiness which is a major feature of *Yellow Earth* and belongs to Daoist aesthetics.

Daoist aesthetics and Yin in Yellow Earth

As in traditional Chinese landscape painting, the natural world overwhelms the depiction of its human inhabitants. The film begins with a shot of earth (*yin*) and sky (*yang*), with the bare yellow loess hills initially dominating, then panning towards the sky before returning to the earth with its shifting horizons. The cinematography is simple, elemental and starkly beautiful. On the low horizon walks Gu Qing (sky dominating) and the camera slowly focuses on him as he hears a lingering folksong and takes out his notebook to record it. Within this forbidding landscape, Gu Qing offers the possibility of liberation in the Communist literary stereotype of this story.

The film ends with similar scenery but in reverse. In the Rain Ceremony, Gu Qing once more appears on the horizon, continually coming but never arriving, and Hanhan strives to reach him against the surging crowd of worshippers. The following final scene 'replays' the opening, a shot of sky and earth panning towards earth. There are no human inhabitants. Only the sound of the dead Cuiqiao's voice, full of desire and recorded with eerily beautiful echoes, fills the space between earth and sky. The song repeats that the Party will save the people but the audience knows by now that it has not saved these particular people. A parched earth and relentless sun have destroyed people's livelihoods, just as a rigid system has destroyed people's lives. Emptiness and space take on different meanings in their different contexts.

Emptiness or 'nothingness' is a key concept in Chinese philosophy and aesthetics. In Daoist philosophy 'nothingness' (*wu*) gives birth to the world, through 'primeval breath' (*qi*) which forms the two principles *yin* and *yang*, the three sources, heaven, earth and man, the four seasons and so on. The union of *yin* and *yang* produces the myriad creatures. 'Nothingness' or space in Chinese philosophy is, therefore, charged with the ultimate positive potential for creation; it is the force which makes manifest and defines all matter.

Ryckmans explains the implications for Chinese aesthetics:

'Nothingness' corresponds to what Western philosophy would call 'being'. . . . 'Being' can only be grasped in its hollowness: it is only its absence that can be delineated – in the same fashion as an intaglio seal shows its patterns through a blank: it is the absence of matter that reveals the design. The notion that the Absolute can only be suggested through emptiness had momentous implications for Chinese aesthetics. . . . [The poet] does not explain, he does not narrate – he makes us see and feel directly.

... [The best painter] writes the meaning of things (instead of describing their appearances or shapes). . . . The ideal painting is achieved not on paper, but in the mind of the spectator. . . .

This point leads us into another theme: the active function of emptiness – the role played by ‘blanks’ in painting, by silence in music, the poems that lie beyond words.³¹

‘Blanks’, silence, meaning beyond words: all these are features of *Yellow Earth*. If we rethink the opening and closing scenes of the film, heaven, earth and man, then the reading becomes charged with a symbolism beyond the tangible images.

The shots of natural scenery, then, operate as ‘blanks’ which give extra meaning to the more crowded images of the people’s lives. Another example is the scene of Cuiqiao’s death. The first shot is of the moon over the river at night, all characteristics of *yin*. Then we see Cuiqiao, desperate but not so desperate that she does not remember to give presents to Hanhan and think of others. Hanhan breaks his silence to stop her crossing the dangerously eddying river, we hear her song break and Hanhan’s heartrending cry, ‘Sister’. Then we see again the swirling waters of the river now empty of Cuiqiao and the boat. The inference is she has drowned. Thus, the moon, night and water are the images beyond discrete form which surround and shroud the human drama. The predominant sound is that of flowing water which, in the *Dao De Jing*, represents both *yin* and the power of *Dao* which seemingly soft and fluid overcomes all else.

Silence is another feature of *Yellow Earth* which sharpens the sounds, whether song or dialogue. As Kaige said, ‘great music has no sound’, or sound itself reverberates into silence which gives it shape. There are many such instances in the film. Cuiqiao’s ritual of drawing water, for example, or Gu Qing’s growing intimacy with the family through wordlessly sharing the work: sweeping the courtyard, drawing water, sewing, ploughing. But the explicit human focus of this silence is Hanhan. Initially, he will not answer Gu Qing’s questions and Cuiqiao explains that he does not like to talk. Gradually, he absorbs Gu Qing’s words, smiles when Gu Qing caresses his head and, finally, sings for him and learns a revolutionary song. But, most importantly, his silent knowledge and acknowledgement of Cuiqiao’s life give her an audience within the film; her songs echo in his silence. Her death is followed by his attempt to run, silently again, towards Gu Qing who appears like a mirage during the Rain ceremony. Brother and sister both yearn for the liberation offered by the Party, Cuiqiao in song and explained action, Hanhan in silence and visualized action.

The human silences are reflected in the larger lack of response by both the Party (Cuiqiao’s plight) and the natural world (the Dragon King’s refusal to answer the peasants’ prayers). The natural world,

river, earth and sun, are pitilessly regardless of human plight, and placating rituals or Party rhetoric are powerless against these forces.

A Daoist reading of *Yellow Earth* gives a meaning that is seen and felt directly, a meaning beyond the images and words. The complexity and depth of the human lives are rendered in stark images against the vast backdrop of the natural world. Minimalized tone, colour and composition are reminiscent of the restraint of classical Chinese painting. Songs and silence overlay the imagery and evoke the lyricism and elusiveness of traditional Chinese poetry. The relationships are not overt or explicit; Chen Kaige stated that the manipulation of the plot was to be concealed: like 'reaching the opposite bank under water'.³² The full quote from the *Dao De Jing* emphasizes the ambiguity and ephemeral nature of things, including the *Dao* which is 'hidden and nameless, yet . . . supports all things and brings them to fulfilment'.³³ In *Yellow Earth* the principles of *yin* and *yang* and, therefore, the very cosmos are out of harmony. These principles are not rigidly fixed to any human gender although Cuiqiao's story and representation are clearly aligned to the characteristics of *yin*. *Yang* symbols are articulated and explicit in the human world but *yin*, the feminine principle, is repressed and ignored. It is the 'hidden' gender.

Conclusion

It was apparently trendy to use Daoist allusions in the mid-eighties when *Yellow Earth* was made.³⁴ But an analysis of the film suggests that Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou, the cinematographer, took the possibilities of Daoist aesthetics seriously in this film. Indeed, by resuscitating and creatively applying traditional Daoism to Chinese cinema, they produced a film which is stunningly 'different' from the usual Communist product and unusually rich in its layers of meanings. Indeed, their very success was a challenge to the marxist aesthetics represented by Gu Qing in the text which have ruled all Chinese artistic production, including cinema, since the early forties. This is not to say that a Daoist reading of *Yellow Earth* is the *only* valid reading but an approach that offers interpretations outside the usual western and Chinese commentaries.

³² Kaige, 'Xiwangpian', p. 2.

³³ Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1988), p. 193.

³⁴ Told to me by Geremie Barmé, co-author of *Seeds of Fire*; see also Kam Louie, 'The short stories of Ah Cheng: Daoism, Confucianism and life' in Louie *Between Fact and Fiction* (Sydney: Wild Peony Press, 1989), pp. 76–90.

Satyajit Ray's *Devi*: constructing a third-world feminist critique

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In this essay, I will examine the efficacy of using psychoanalytic models prevalent within western feminist film theory for a feminist critique of third-world films. I will argue that the political use of psychoanalysis has some relevance to third-world women, as the experience of postcolonialism inscribes them within western practices. But we, as third-world feminists, must also begin to theorize the non-western elements of our experience, the elements that acquire their meaning in the context of specific cultural practices. I will look, specifically, at Satyajit Ray's *Devi* ('The Goddess', 1960), a feminist film that undertakes the construction of female identity, in order to conceptualize differences in western and third-world cinematic hermeneutics.¹

Satyajit Ray's *Devi* can be analysed according to western paradigms of signification. Certainly, Ray's education and class background (he was born and raised in the urban middle-class milieu of Calcutta) exposed him to western thought and learning. But his preoccupation with rural history, folk-cultures and religions of India, as well as the complex relations between western and Indian practices in postcolonial urban cultures, points to his interest in articulating the non-western aspects of Indian culture.² Given Ray's background and interests, his films become the ground on which western and non-western practices and modes of thought are articulated against each other.

I want to look at Ray's film *Devi* as a feminist attempt to create a female subject and to expose the effects of certain oppressive economic, social and religious practices on female subjectivity. I will

1 Satyajit Ray, *Devi*, 1960; distributed in the US by Facets Multimedia, Chicago, IL, 1981. All further citations will refer to this print of the film.

2 Andrew Robinson, *Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), offers a comprehensive sketch of Satyajit Ray's career, work, background and views. Robinson's work provides much biographical, cultural and sociological information on Ray and his films but does not analyse Ray's work in the light of current theoretical debates and critical perspectives.

3 Laura Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1975), pp. 6–18.

4 Mulvey defends and revises 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' in 'Afterthoughts on "Visual pleasure and narrative cinema" inspired by *Duel in the Sun*', *Framework*, vol. 6, nos 15–17 (1981), pp. 12–15, where she explains her categorization of desire as primarily male desire by situating her project as one which seeks to explain the relation between the image and the spectator in terms of a 'masculinization of the spectator position', p. 69.

argue that his film can, to begin with, be analysed according to western feminist paradigms – in particular, according to the psychoanalytic model articulated in the work of Laura Mulvey. I have chosen Mulvey's work in analysing *Devi* for two reasons. First, Mulvey's 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema'³ may be considered the seminal document of current feminist film theory, offering the first sustained critique of cinematic form and expression in terms of sexual difference. Her work has attracted many criticisms and revaluations since, and I will add to these revaluations a third-world feminist perspective.⁴ Second, the plot of *Devi* revolves around the problem of female subjectivity. Ray is explicit in his critique of ideology as expressed through patriarchal family structures and Hindu religious orthodoxy in the film, but his critique is focused through the woman's sense of self, and her degeneration into delusion and madness.

I will go on, though, to examine aspects of *Devi* which cannot be explained within the terms of Mulvey's paradigm. As feminist critics have indicated, there is no space within it for the articulation of female desire, and Ray explicitly attempts to construct the absent female subject. Moreover, certain sexual signifiers in the film – and I will point specifically to the figure of the goddess Kali – can only acquire meaning through their specific cultural context. To call for a sociology of sexual meanings, is to relativize and historicize psychoanalysis as just one way of structuring meaning, and one which is by no means transhistorical or transcultural.

Devi

With these issues in mind let us look at the gender depiction in *Devi*. The plot revolves around Doyamoyee, a young village bride living in a rich orthodox *zamindari* (landed-gentry) household in mid-nineteenth century Bengal. Her husband, Umamprasad, is away in the city studying for his examinations. She takes care of her aging widowed father-in-law, Kalikinkar. He becomes very attached to her and dreams one night that she is an incarnation of the goddess Kali. Since Kalikinkar is a powerful landowner in the village, he has the social clout to make his dream a reality: Doyamoyee is worshipped, publicly, as the goddess Kali.

Kali is the mother-goddess celebrated throughout Bengal. She symbolizes strength in her more benign form (Durga), but also wreaks a terrible vengeance and wrath on her followers if they invoke her displeasure. The worship of Kali has always been widespread in Bengal, but she became even more popular in the nineteenth century when a religious mystic, Ramkrishna, came on the scene; Ramkrishna experienced multiple visions and worshipped his own wife as Kali. Thus Kalikinkar's dream has a certain degree of historical validity.

Doyamoyee's deification brings Umaprasad back into the village. He is deeply repelled by his father's irrationality but helpless to fight this powerful Hindu orthodoxy. Moreover, there is Doyamoyee's apparent power to cure a dying child from the village. She begins to believe in her divine powers. During an abortive midnight flight with her husband, she glimpses the scattered remains of an idol of Durga (a form of Kali) washed up by the river. The sight seems to symbolize her mortality, her reduction to material form if she denies her own godliness. So she returns to the village and her divine role.

But at the end of the story she fails to 'cure' her nephew. The male heir to the estate, he dies without any medical treatment, as he had been entrusted to Doyamoyee's powers by her father-in-law. The latter collapses at the tragedy, and Doyamoyee's husband bluntly informs Kalikinkar that he is responsible for the death. But Doyamoyee, increasingly alienated from her husband, sister-in-law and the women and children of the household, and so from her earlier sense of self, blames herself for the child's death and lapses into madness.

Ideological critique of *Devi*

Ray's feminist orientation and message is relatively clear in *Devi*. We can delineate four major indications of this. First, the case against Kalikinkar is never articulated simply on grounds of rationality, in spite of the staged ideological confrontation between father and son. Umaprasad's main indictment of his father is the latter's oppression of Doyamoyee. While his liberal educated friends in Calcutta, for instance, argue that Kalikinkar's actions are a clear violation of a husband's marital rights, Umaprasad, as the controlling consciousness, privileges the persecution of women over questions of civil rights or rational debate. Second, Ray is usually sensitive to social power structures, even though they are seldom direct objects of critique, but here he does not draw our attention even once to the class dichotomies within the feudal structure. There is a smooth ideological continuum between Kalikinkar and his serfs: the issue of oppression becomes solely focused on the oppression of women. Third, Umaprasad's helplessness against Hindu orthodoxy limits the scope of his actions within the narrative. And Ray indicates that his limitations exist also on the level of perception: his guesses about Doyamoyee's wishes are not always correct, as we see in her refusal to escape with him to the city. The film closes with Umaprasad's incomprehension of Doyamoyee's mental state. His line of vision vanishes abruptly into the blinding sunlight as his bride, dishevelled but terrifyingly bedecked in all her jewellery, rushes out of the house and disappears from sight. Ray also indicates that Umaprasad is not free from the critique the film

extends to the imposition of identity on women. In a flashback to their wedding night, Umaprasad jokingly characterizes the shy, inarticulate Doyamoyee as an earthen doll (*mateer putul*) who cannot speak. Then astounded by her beauty as he raises her veil, he calls her a *pratima*, a term used to describe both a beautiful object and the clay image of a goddess. Here Umaprasad is not speaking of divinity but of material beauty, but it is interesting that later in the story, when Doyamoyee sees the scattered clay of the idols on the river shore and refuses to be reduced to her material form, she registers her discomfort with this earlier erotic objectification. Lastly, the only other rational figure in the film is Doyamoyee's sister-in-law. As the second important female figure in the story, it is striking that she possessed a clear-eyed realism (different from Umaprasad's more intellectualized rationality), and the strength to act on, but not to articulate, her beliefs. It is she who writes to Umaprasad to return to the village; it is she who vainly attempts to get some medical help for her dying son.

Given these feminist angles, I would argue that it is the ideological battle between father and son which provides the scenario within which Ray takes up the challenge of constructing a female subject. Thus, when I speak of ideology in *Devi*, I am speaking primarily of the ideology of sexual difference and not the overt confrontation between rationalism and religious orthodoxy.

The ideology of patriarchy in *Devi*

The proceedings in *Devi* are framed by Doyamoyee's husband who is ideologically opposed to his father. The father, Kalinkar, is a man born into wealth and privilege with strong religious and paternalistic beliefs. His son is educated in the western sciences – he goes away to Calcutta, the metropolis of colonial rule and western learning. Umaprasad espouses liberal beliefs such as widow remarriage, civil rights within marriage, the education of women and so on. But the war between father and son is waged on Doyamoyee and she becomes the mediator of two forms of patriarchy, historically placed in antithesis. The father defines Doyamoyee's actions within the plot of the film but it is the son's controlling gaze that incorporates the diegesis within a rational frame of mind. We look at events through Umaprasad's shocked and helpless gaze and his are the last indictments in the story. Thus male agency is passed from father to son: the father controls 'woman' but the son truly 'knows' her. In this sense, the narrative diegesis is in keeping with Mulvey's argument about the male control of femininity on screen.

Moreover, the narrative can also be read using Mulvey's paradigm of castration and lack. The woman as goddess is a fetishization of femininity that hides the lack:

5 Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', p. 14.

the disavowal of castration by the substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous.⁵

In fact, Doyamoyee is positioned as an object of desire for her father-in-law who cross-examines her closely, if teasingly, about her relations with her husband. Through his gazes, conversation and his demands on her time and labour we can see his erotic attachment to his young daughter-in-law, even though all this is played out within the norms of socially accepted behaviour within extended families. More telling is his dream upon which Doyamoyee's deification is based: in the dream, the eyes of the goddess Kali, the site that evokes castration, are replaced by those of Doyamoyee, who appears in place of the goddess. Kalikinkar's disavowal of castration turns an ominous dream into a mystic vision, erotic object into fetish. In the end, the fetish reveals the absence it conceals: Doyamoyee cannot cure the male heir and thus destroys Kalikinkar's paternalistic aspirations.

Feminist critique in *Devi*

In depicting the father-son struggle, Ray uses classic formal elements: for example, in the scene of a major father-son confrontation, he uses several scissor movements across the room – across each other's lines of vision, across each other's forms within each frame – to denote conflict. But use of movement or sound is not conducive to constructing Doyamoyee's viewpoint as she never articulates her violated feelings, and her ability to act is severely limited within the story. Ray improvises by using the camera's exploration of the space and the settings that Doyamoyee inhabits to cue us in to her changing sensibilities.⁶

Initially, Doyamoyee acts freely within her own rooms and the women's section of the house. Her married life is closely guarded from the camera by showing us two muffled intimate forms within a mosquito net. Later, she is moved to a public bedroom where she has constant attendance and little privacy. The camera begins to focus on her closely and then move away in a leisurely fashion. This gives us a sense of spatial depth and distance. Within the film this kind of long shot is used in halls, ceremonial places and public grounds, so its use on Doyamoyee increasingly thrusts her into a public sphere. These shots infiltrate into spaces which were once Doyamoyee's places of private refuge: for example, we have one such long intrusive shot when she escapes to her bedroom and wants to resume her playful games with her little nephew, or when she retires to read a letter from her husband. The women and children of the household peep at her through casements, windows, doorways and stairways. These apertures all acquire a symbolic coding,

6 Some of the early reviews of *Devi* missed Ray's subtleties in constructing the female subject. The reviewers thus criticized the character of Doyamoyee, described as 'sharp as a pin', as unbelievable and inconsistent in her sudden collapse and loss of sanity. (Eric Rhode, review of *Devi*, *Sight and Sound*, vol. 33, no. 4 (1964), pp. 195–6.) Ray answered western criticisms that could not quite fathom the importance of religious orthodoxy at this historical period in 'Under western eyes', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 51, no. 4 (1982), pp. 268–74. See also the reviews of *Devi* in *The Times*, 27 August 1964, p. 5, and *Cinema Visions*, vol. 1, no. 4 (1980), p. 17.

emphasizing the slow process of confinement within a deified role and the exclusion of Doyamoyee's other spheres of interaction. We begin to understand the assault on Doyamoyee's sensibilities, her enforced perception of herself as a single-faceted personality by the increased imposition of public space, connoting her reduction to a single public role.

Ray's use of space in creating a narrative diegesis of oppression is important because it sheds some light on how gender identity is signified in this film. If the space one occupies is definitive of one's freedom or oppression, and if freedom or oppression defines one's sense of self (as in this film), then space must have some relation to identity. I would argue that Doyamoyee's identity is largely derived from the spheres within which she operates, such as the prayer-room, her bedroom, the corridors of the women's quarters. These spheres connote the different roles she inhabits which are in turn defined by her actions within them: her marital relations, her care of the household goddess, her games with her nephew. So if the multidimensionality of space is slowly destroyed in the film, we can formulate an analogous movement within Doyamoyee's sense of self which becomes focused, through her deification, on a single attribute – her ability to sustain life. When this power fails her she loses all sense of self and collapses. Her madness takes the form of a frenetic bedecking of herself with all her jewellery, indicating her own desperate and futile fetishization of herself since these accoutrements are symbolic of public display.

Thus Ray manages to carve out a space for the articulation of female subjectivity. Moreover, as we shall see, his 'narrative diegesis' of female subjectivity is backed by his 'imaging' of 'woman'. If we recapitulate Mulvey's notion of the tension between the diegesis or the flow of action and the eroticized image of 'woman', then Ray's film falls outside of Mulvey's categories. It fulfils, instead, Johnston and Cook's notion of a rupture in the semiotic, a denaturalization of the means of representation that exposes the myth-making functions of patriarchal ideology.⁷

It is not that Ray does not eroticize Doyamoyee. As the film proceeds, the shots that try to capture Doyamoyee become flatter and more poster-like ('stylized' in Mulvey's terminology), her stare increasingly focuses on the camera, looking at what the camera sees – herself as goddess. But there is one important difference – Ray uses flatter images later in the film to illustrate his thematic critique of the reduction of real women to images and symbols. Image-making by the camera mocks the actions of Umaprasad, Kalikinkar, the village community and all who reduce Doyamoyee to a goddess. Simultaneously, the camera critiques its own complicity in such practices, so the narrative of imposition and the image as imposition function together and not in tension with each other.

The camera can also critique its own task in the latter half of the

7 See Pam Cook and Claire Johnston, 'The place of woman in the cinema of Raoul Walsh' in Phil Hardy (ed.), *Edinburgh Film Festival* publication, 1974; reprinted in Constance Penley (ed.), *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall, 1988), pp. 25–35.

film because it has earlier 'imaged' differently. In the first part of the film, Doyamoyee is always seen in relation to someone – her young nephew, her husband, her father-in-law, her pet bird. Individualized closeups of her form and face are rare and so the later flat images of her face are in sharp contrast to the earlier depictions. In terms of the actions corresponding to these relational images, Doyamoyee has some agency over her relations with others. For example, she is categorical about her demarcation of her spheres of interaction: there is quiet assertion in turning her face away from her father-in-law's intrusive questions about her marital relations, even as she disagrees with her husband about leaving the family home on the grounds of her duty to her father-in-law and the household.

Thus Ray makes a departure from the classic narrative Mulvey critiques in her psychoanalytic model: firstly, he attempts to construct a female subject through his use of space and, secondly, he critiques modes of representation through self-reflexive image-making. But, significantly, he also moves outside of Mulvey's model through the sexual signifiers that he uses. His depictions of gender are, inevitably, inscribed within the specific cultural practices of Bengal which cannot be explained through ahistorically situated psychoanalytic paradigms.



Devi (Courtesy of Satyajit Ray)

Cultural contextualizations

When she situates her project, Mulvey characterizes her use of psychoanalysis as 'political' and pertinent to an ideological context within which the model serves as a 'psychical structure' that backs the ruling (male) ideology.⁸ For our purposes we may ask the

⁸ Mulvey, 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', pp. 6-8

9 See Teresa De Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

10 For research on Kali (written in English) see David Kingsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions on the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). To some degree, my claims about the worship of Kali are also derived from local legend, stories and personal participation in the Hindu religion.

question: can a sexual signifier, such as the mother-goddess Kali, acquire a different meaning through a perusal of its iconography, and social and religious history? In such an endeavour, the work of critics such as Teresa De Lauretis is useful since she inscribes signifying practices that define gender (such as psychoanalytic paradigms) within the historical and cultural contexts of their use.⁹

The figure of the goddess Kali is interesting because she has the illusion of plenitude (which is the function of the fetish object after the Oedipal complex or the perception of castration and sexual difference), but her fame, or infamy, also rests on her destructive consuming powers. That is, worshipping Kali involves a precarious balance between satiating the mother in her beneficent form and a fascination with death and commingling, a preoedipal desire for communion with the mother who absorbs all and is responsible for salvation.¹⁰ At times, Kali is the deity for tantric rites of achieving oneness with cosmic energy; at other times, she assumes the form of a wilful child or the stalker of cremation grounds. She exists as both representation (plenitude) and the absorbing Other (cosmic destruction and communion), if we are to translate her roles into psychoanalytic terms of signification. Certainly, the history of her iconography and worship resist her reduction to mere fetish or the veil that hides lack.

This also suggests that certain specificities in cultural practices, which can be pointed out by sociological analysis, strain at the psychoanalytic model that Mulvey constructs. Only a history of sexuality that incorporates such specificities (here, drawing together the links between religious, economic and sexual practices), and only a history which designates the Freudian/Lacanian subject as a pervasive but historically situated idea, linked to the crystallization of the nuclear family, can address the complexities of gender depiction in a film like *Devi*.

Conclusions

I have indicated, and the trajectory of this article has marked out, the efficacy of using psychoanalytic models to analyse Indian films, since the history of the West and postcolonial cultures have been similar in the rise of capitalism and its effects on family structure. Moreover, given that the urban elite towards whom Ray's films are aimed are inscribed within western paradigms of thought, western models are pertinent for our purposes, at least from the point of view of spectatorship. But neither postcolonial films nor spectators can be seen merely as westernised counterparts, translating our thoughts across continents and cultures. We must examine the correlation of western and third-world (here, Indian, and more specifically, Bengali) systems of signification. Thus in the latter part

of this essay, I have tried to problematize aspects of *Devi* that cannot be understood through western film theories without a certain amount of sociological and historical recasting.

Can we, as third-world feminist critics, use the hermeneutics of sexual difference and signification that are in place in the west, even as we recontextualize our structures of desire? Can we retain the notion of energy or desire – and therefore, the apparatus available in film theory that speaks of psycho-social processes and the mapping of social and sexual energies – even as we historicize those psychological and social processes for the analysis of third-world films?

For example, I have indicated that sexual difference in *Devi* is signified through erotic desire and labour.¹¹ In Ray's use of space there is the assumption that identity is connected to spheres of activity. Even in the relational imaging of Doyamoyee prior to her deification, her role is always that of the caretaker and her identity is defined by the labour that is extracted from her. She seems to be animated by a 'labour-energy' that she utilizes in her various roles and this energy is used as a life-sustaining force. It acquires symbolic form when she is fetishised as the mother-goddess. Can there be a paradigm which articulates sexual difference in terms of labour, specific to historical situation?

The problem posed by this paper is, then, two-fold: firstly, how can we theorize the particular forms of desire specific to nineteenth-century Bengal (in this film), that pertain to sexual difference, religion and labour? Secondly, how do we demarcate the relations between western and non-western analyses, ways of structuring meaning and modes of thought? Only with these questions in mind, can we 'apply' western feminist theory to third-world texts without effecting a colonization of third-world criticism.

I would like to thank Bhaskar Sarkar for his rigorous appraisal of and editorial help with this article.

¹¹ For analyses of sexual difference and labour see marxist feminists such as Gayle Rubin, 'The traffic in women: notes on the political economy of sex', in Rainer R. Reiter (ed.), *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); and marxist critics such as John Brenkman, 'The social constitution of subjectivity' in *Culture and Domination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), who have contextualized the Freudian model in terms of labour.

The film reviews of Winifred Horrabin, 1927–45

IAN TAYLOR

The purpose of this article is to raise questions about a neglected aspect of cinema history – *popular* film criticism. My particular concern is the work of Winifred Horrabin, the author of a large number of film reviews in *Lansbury's Labour Weekly* (1925 to 1927), *Tribune* (1940 to 1945) and the *Manchester Evening News* (1944 to 1948). Horrabin's name is not well remembered by film historians today, in part because of the relatively obscure locations in which her reviews appeared, but also, perhaps, because she did not define herself as a specialized film writer. Like many of the self-educated and upwardly mobile working-class women of the 1920s and 1930s, Horrabin 'dabbled' in a range of writing, and her ventures into film reviewing as such were entered into at two quite distinct historical moments. The reviews produced for *Lansbury's Labour Weekly* were written in the period leading up to the election of the Ramsay MacDonald Labour Government, and undertaken alongside a range of other kinds of writing on matters of pressing popular and political concern. Her second period of film reviewing coincided with World War II (discussed later in this article).

What all Horrabin's journalism featured was a commitment to socialist feminism. Throughout the late 1920s, for example, she ran the 'A Woman's Commentary' page in the Independent Labour Party (ILP) newspaper, the *New Leader*. Here Horrabin commented on subjects as diverse as the politics of housework, the potential of the women members of Parliament elected in 1929, the implications for socialist feminists of 'this Etiquette business', and the male-dominated nature of political platforms. But she also used her space

for commentaries and criticism on books and on film.

Horrabin's journalistic interests and opportunities in the 1930s reflected the extraordinarily gendered division of labour – and, I might add, the 'political imagination' – which characterized the socialist press of the period. Throughout this period, lead stories in papers like *The New Leader* – stories focusing on 'the class struggle', 'the struggle against Fascism', 'fights for the soul of the Labour Party' and/or vigorous debates around questions of nationalization and economic policy – were written by men. Women writers were confined to the second half of these papers, but they covered a vast range of topics, from schools, hospitals, nutrition and welfare provision, to discussions, for example, of the gendered organization of the Whit Sunday 'walk'.

A critical effect of this apparently quite tightly organized division of labour between male and female journalists was that it provided a space for – or the conditions of existence of – a particular version of socialist-feminist cultural studies. The critical pieces produced by Winifred Horrabin, Minnie Pallister and Ellen Wilkinson in *The New Leader*, by Ethel Mannin and Leonora Sayles in *Lansbury's Labour Weekly* ranged far and wide over cultural and social questions. In short, if film criticism in Britain's socialist press of the 1920s and 1930s was regarded as trivial, as women's work, it is now only understandable as a part of a feminist critique of everyday social practice and popular culture. Horrabin's film reviews have to be read in the context of a more far reaching critique of social inequality and of the dominant culture of the day, alongside a wider identification with 'popular culture', a broader strand of populism. Horrabin did not, for example, produce the wholesale denunciation of Hollywood film that one might expect from a self-proclaimed socialist (as a decadent product of capitalist civilization and so on). Her review of *So This Is Paris*, published in *Lansbury's Labour Weekly* in November 1926, is characteristic:

It is hard to try and find a 'message' to broadcast to the world's workers about this film. It is quite immoral, it has no special attraction as regards production or lighting or photography, the actors are not called upon to be specifically clever, the most effective scenes depict a drunken orgy at an Artists' Ball where the Charleston breaks loose in its most hectic form, and yet – tell it not in Gath – the film is amusing and enjoyable . . . if you want to forget your nonconformist upbringing for a while then do go.¹

¹ Winifred Horrabin, 'So This is Paris', *Lansbury's Labour Weekly*, 13 November 1926, p. 6.

Horrabin's second shift as a film reviewer took place in different circumstances (when socialist populism had a different resonance). Four months into World War II, on 3 January 1940, Horrabin began producing film criticism for *Tribune*, almost always on page thirteen, next to the 'letters to the editor' page. Between 3 January 1940 and

16 March 1945, she reviewed over 660 different movies, usually in groups of two or three, whilst also writing the book-review page. On 5 February 1944 she also took on the role of film critic for the *Manchester Evening News* and in the following four-and-a-half years (to 28 August 1948), under her pen name 'Freda Wynne', wrote 232 weekly columns (nearly always focusing on films about to be released in the city).

It is obviously the case that Winifred Horrabin's film criticism was shaped by its historical context. In part, her commitment was born of a recognition of the mass popularity of cinema. George Orwell, a fellow contributor to *Tribune*, had written on this issue in 1940, and another contemporary commentator, the feminist social scientist, Pearl Jephcott, wrote in 1942 about the massive popularity of the two weekly film magazines, *Picturegoer* and *Picture Show*, particularly amongst adolescent girls:

It is not unusual to find a girl of fourteen who goes to the pictures nearly every night . . . another not untypical girl, who is just fifteen and works in a London office, has been to the cinema several times a week for the last five years.²

It was amongst the committed population of moviegoers, and especially amongst those who had been drawn to the Left by the events of the 1930s, or by the facts of their own political socialization, that Horrabin found her readership. She was, of course, not alone in her interest in a socialist film perspective. The importance of the cinema (and particularly its potential as an instrument of propaganda) was an active area of debate on the Left from the late 1920s. One of the earliest developments – focusing on both film production and criticism – was the establishment by the ILP of the Masses' Stage and Film Guild, followed, in the summer of 1933, by the Socialist Film Council. A leading member of the SFC, Horrabin's friend Raymond Postgate, pronounced at the time that its objective was, quite straightforwardly, 'Making Films to Make Socialists'.³ It is not at all clear, however, that Winifred Horrabin shared this conception of film as a missionary or propagandist device which could mobilize support for the socialist idea. Whilst she was always quick to identify, and reject, the political subtexts of mass-released American movies – particularly in respect of the bias so repetitively exhibited against organized labour – it is also true, as I have already noted, that she had considerable respect for – and sympathy with – the popular impact of 'Hollywood'.

A key feature of Horrabin's criticism – in contrast, perhaps, with film reviewers working within other political traditions or within a purely aesthetic perspective – was her sense of identity with her readership, which, she assumed, shared her working-class experience and common-sense preoccupations. This was underlined by the

² Pearl Jephcott, *Girls Growing Up* (London: Faber, 1942), p. 116

³ Quoted in Stephen G. Jones, *The British Labour Movement and Film, 1918–1939* (London: Routledge, 1987), p. 142.

trying circumstances of the war-time emergency, which threatened – successfully for a brief time – to close cinemas: in a column entitled a ‘Salute to the usherettes’, Horrabin observed that:

Cinema usherettes have much to put up with, not the least being those silly costumes they have to wear. But I shall never see one of the those extravagantly cocked hats, or a pair of those baggy breeches covering a jaunty behind, and want to giggle again. I shall remember the time when, as synthetic drama unfolded inside the cinema, suddenly real drama came in through the window and there was no ducking for cover, no trembling of those attractive knees, just an added reassuring swagger down the centre aisle, an encouraging normality about the flick of a torch, even a friendly, if tremulous whisper of ‘you are safer in here’. . . . I give Priestley cinema attendants to add to his list of those little women who will ultimately help to defeat the Nazis.⁴

Throughout Horrabin’s film writing, there is a keen awareness that the world of cinema and film did not begin and end in the West End of London. In March 1940, she devoted a full page to ‘The pictures at your local’ which, as the column subheading went on to explain, showed ‘the films you can see, not only those that are still only on at one house in London’s West End’.⁵ In the early years of the war, Horrabin engaged in an active exchange with her readership over the issue of whether to review films at the moment of their release in the West End, or, alternatively, as they went onto ‘general release’ into the provinces, and, in January 1941, she took a direct approach to the viewing preferences of the *Tribune* filmgoing audience:

Would anyone like to write to me to tell me, for a change, what sort of films THEY like? You have listened so patiently to me telling you the sort I like . . . There is much to talk about; for example, the use of films for propaganda, or whether the screen should entertain us lightly in wartime and never preach, or what constitutes a box-office draw, or whether everyday folk could possibly enjoy a high-brow film . . . can’t we talk it over?⁶

Horrabin was giving voice here to a particular form of socialist populism:

One of the best memories of my early so-called Utopian-Socialist days is that in the old *Clarion* one felt in touch with the folk who wrote it and ran it. ‘Comrade’ had a real meaning then. We ought to be able to give it a new, real meaning now, when so many of us are separated from folk we want to be with, when our usual way of life is altered, and the new one is strange, when we feel a little lonely and are glad of companionship. And if you don’t like the word ‘comrade’, choose one from this list taken from *Roger’s Thesaurus*:

4 Winifred Horrabin, ‘Salute to the usherettes’, *Tribune*, 11 October 1940, pp. 14–15.

5 Winifred Horrabin, ‘The pictures at your local’, *Tribune*, 15 March 1940, pp. 10–11.

6 Winifred Horrabin, ‘What films do you like?’, *Tribune*, 24 January 1941, p. 11.

7 Ibid., p. 11.

'Friend, well-wisher, intimate acquaintance, ally, partisan, associate, mate, colleague, crony, play-fellow, chum, buddy, bunkie, pal.'

Whoever you are, let's hear from you.⁷

Horrabin's sense of ease with her readership gave her film reviewing a highly opinionated and often personal character. Many of her critical views clearly derived from her sense of the class structure and its expressive details. In her 1942 review of *Ball of Fire*, for example, she observed that:

Barbara Stanwyck as the night club queen – she cries if she has to wear last year's ermine, we are told – was scrumptious, wise-cracking, and heart-of-goldish, but looked to me far more like the most popular young lady at a slick society boarding school than anything from the underworld.⁸

8 Winifred Horrabin, 'The films', *Tribune*, 3 April 1942, p. 18.

Or, again, on Sonya Henye in *Wintertime* (1943):

The Americans have given new life to the English public school-R.A.F. adjective of the late thirties – 'wizard' – and it will do very nicely to describe Sonya Henye's skating in *Wintertime*, which is described as an ice-skating spectacular with music. She seems more at home on skates than anywhere else and it seems a pity that someone doesn't write an amusing, tricky little story to fit her, for to tell the truth, although it is a good excuse for seeing Sonya, this film is very little else.⁹

9 Winifred Horrabin, 'Spy or love story?', *Manchester Evening News*, 12 February 1944, p. 2.

In her review of *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), by contrast, Horrabin obviously identified with Tom Joad. She pointed powerfully to those scenes in which Joad experienced a

vague stirring of something to master those 'uncontrollable' forces which had ruined his young life and scattered the Joads like chaff from their own wheat.¹⁰

10 Winifred Horrabin, 'An epic film of the dispossessed', *Tribune*, 2 August 1940, pp. 10–11.

For Horrabin, as for most other socialists of her generation, the memories of the Great Depression and its effects on the lives of young working families were inescapable.

From this perspective, film reviewing involved the common-sense reading of situation and character, and Horrabin rarely followed the critical convention of treating film as an aesthetic object or quasi-literary text. Her reviews focused on actors and actresses, how well they performed, whether they were the right person for the role, whether the clothes were right or the jokes were funny, and even simply whether Winifred liked them or not. It is an expression of Horrabin's populist discourse that she wrote first of films' stars. She well knew that this was the first concern of the cinemagoing masses and she understood that her audience was most interested in personalities and plots. Her review of *Safari* (1940) is characteristic:

11 Winifred Horrabin, 'A jungle affaire', *Tribune*, 19 July 1940, p. 15.

12 Winifred Horrabin, 'A dramatic film of a convoy', *Tribune*, 16 August 1940, pp. 16–17.

13 Raymond Williams, 'Cinema and socialism' in *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 116.

Safari's I'm concerned, you can have *Safari*. It's a feeble film, flickering its way to a dull finish. It left me wondering if, in the good old days, Madeleine Carroll had been a good teacher, and if so why she had ever left that admirable and useful profession.¹¹

Or, again, on *I Take This Woman* (1939), another feeble story:

pulled out of a hat by Spencer's (Tracy) sympathetic acting and by, I suppose, Hedy Lamarr's beauty. (She is a bit too toothy for my liking.)¹²

It is not clear now to what extent Horrabin's elevation of personal and emotional experience over abstract or aesthetic debate reflected her own response to films or her sense of her readership. Either way, her reviews both reflected and helped to articulate the terms of the popular enjoyment of cinema (and of women's enjoyment, in particular). Horrabin was thus aware of the value of film as a site for the exploration of personal experience and emotion (rather than for the collective debate of political principle or military strategy). She would have agreed with Raymond Williams's observation that

if we are serious about . . . political life we have to enter that world in which people live as they can themselves, and they necessarily live within a whole complex of work and love and illness and natural beauty.¹³

As popular culture in the 1930s and 1940s, film was not just a means of escape. It was also a resource which audiences could use in sustaining a sense of personal regard and strength. If many male members of the cinema audience worked their way through the war imagining that they were Humphrey Bogart, Cary Grant or Spencer Tracy (and dressing and performing as such) so many women modelled their lives, dress and gestures on Joan Crawford, Greer Garson and Hedy Lamarr. Horrabin did not disdain such imitation: it was here, indeed, as much as in respect of the more obviously or overtly political implications of films, that she derived her ideas of the social significance of wartime film production and audience response.

In describing Horrabin's film reviewing as populist, I am, then, referring specifically to her concern for, and interest in film as a form of morality play, as a popular diversion (open to everyone) which displaced into a fictional world real-world experiences, problems and anxieties. Horrabin's identity with her readers' responses to films had various political consequences. It is quite clear, for example, that she, like J. B. Priestley, was far less troubled about the use of film as wartime propaganda than were many prominent left-wing socialists at the time. In a review of a 1940 Ministry of Information documentary entitled *Heart of Empire*, Horrabin describes a scene in which Canadian, Australian, and New

Zealand soldiers are walking around the dome of St Paul's and looking out over London:

A propos of which, I want to say that in nearly a year of twice-weekly cinema visits, the only films I ever hear applauded are the documentary films. So next time anyone babbles to you about the unpopularity of propaganda tell 'em that. It is a two-edged sword, but two edges properly used are twice as useful as one, if my mathematics are correct.¹⁴

14 Winifred Horrabin, 'Go West young Mormon', *Tribune*, 7 February 1941, p. 7.

Horrabin speaks here to the sense of patriotism which infused the radicalism of the war-time years. For her, as for her readers, this was no mere rhetorical gesture: she was writing reviews of films produced during a struggle against Fascism; it made political sense to evaluate those films from a moral and strategic standpoint, in terms of whether or not they contributed to the good humour and commitment of a people involved in total war. A secondary theme in many of the Ministry of Information films, like *Heart of Empire*, was the unity of the fighting forces of a United Commonwealth against the enemy, and in the pages of *Tribune* the presence of Commonwealth troops was often taken as evidence of the international, and even popular, character of the war.

But Horrabin was also in no doubt about the escapist character of many of the films on general release during World War II and, in particular, of the films emanating from Hollywood. This seemed to her quite unsurprising and in many ways unobjectionable. Her 1940 review of *Pinnocchio*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gulliver's Travels*, for example, began with the observation that all three films were

ways of escape from London in war-time. All Good Clean Fun. I can never understand why escapist is supposed to be a term of abuse. Considering the nature of this world of ours, especially just now, it seems only plain sense to try to forget it, if only for a brief time.¹⁵

15 Winifred Horrabin, 'Cartoon films are good, clean fun', *Tribune*, 29 March 1940, pp. 14–15.

Horrabin frequently refers to the 'moving' character of a film, recognizing that the cinema's appeal lay precisely in its ability to transport its audience out of their everyday lives. She was not slow to advise her readership 'to bring a spare hankie' to a film, and even, in one case, approvingly used Hollywood's own marketing language, describing a film as 'a four hankie job'! But she also took it for granted that her readers, like her, knew that this was escapism. 'After a sleepless night in a "safe" area in one of the Home Counties', she wrote in *Tribune* in October 1940,

when mist, dripping trees and a shrouded, ghostly hunter's moon formed a fitting background for the evening's bangs, wallops and distant crumps, one rather resents being urged to laugh, be thrilled or chilled or mystified by accounts of other people's

16 Winifred Horrabin, '13 miles from the nearest cinema', *Tribune*, 25 October 1940, pp. 14–15.

17 Winifred Horrabin, 'Shows', *Tribune*, 29 January 1943, pp. 10–11.

18 See for example the contemporary audience views expressed in Jeffrey Richards and Dorothy Sheridan (eds), *Mass Observation at the Movies* (London: Routledge, 1987).

19 Winifred Horrabin, 'The films', *Tribune*, 5 June 1942, p. 17.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

celluloid adventures in what, for the time being, is actually a safe area – Hollywood Away from the cinema – the nearest one is thirteen miles from where I write this – one must perforce *just read about* 'the great stars, the great stories and the great directors' to quote the weekly film press.¹⁶

The popularity of this escapist medium was clearly not confined to the war-time emergency. Working-class feminist and committed socialist as she was, Horrabin fully understood that the cinema had always worked at the level of fantasy, and she was particularly interested in the ways in which particular films and particular actors and actresses shaped dreams of love and sexuality and fulfilled both 'masculine' and 'feminine' desires. Writing in 1943, she declared:

If you like Betty Grable (and those who do not cannot recognise talent), or lovely legs, when you see 'em, then you will like *Footlight Serenade*. Victor Mature and John Payne are the masculine bait for feminine hearts to balance the dainty and dazzling Betty, in this tale of a pure-at-heart chorus girl who gets involved with a champion boxer who, in his turn, is involved in a musical show where he can dance and box, and sing and everything. . . . The whole improbable thing sparkles, and as I prefer James Gleason's bowler to Victor Mature's torso, none of it seemed a waste of time to me! . . . If Twentieth-Century Fox filmed the Telephone Directory we'd watch it spell-bound, and when they decide to combine a musical show, a boxing tournament with heart throbs, lots of cuties and the screen's No. 1 Casanova (Victor Mature) then we certainly get something. *Footlight Serenade* is in for a run.¹⁷

In such direct evaluations of the appearance, sexual appeal and presentation of 1940s stars Horrabin recognized the curiosity (or sensibility) of the popular film audience itself.¹⁸ In a short review of the Anna Neagle/Amy Johnson film, *They Flew Alone* (1941), Horrabin suggests that

If Amy had to be glamourised, I cannot think of anyone better able to do it than Anna Neagle. And if any man could keep his hand steady with her beside him in a fetching uniform he would certainly have the strength of mind for almost anything.¹⁹

In the same issue, Horrabin also directs her wit on a rather different star, the female lead of *A Woman of the Year* (1942):

Katharine Hepburn is not everybody's cup of tea. If you don't like her face – and certainly a good fairy only just managed to keep it from being described as toothy – you won't like *Woman of the Year*.²⁰

Horrabin goes on to describe how Katharine Hepburn is shown as a 'lady journalist', a woman who 'can do everything, write radio, dress ravishingly, conduct the League of Nations and vamp all the

men in sight'. She marries Spencer Tracy and then loses him 'because although she can scintillate nationally and even internationally, in the domestic sphere of babies and cooking she is a fearful flop'. 'Well, well!' Horrabin then comments, with some restraint:

the central theme [of *A Woman of the Year*] has been shot to pieces so many times it will hardly take another shot. However, here is mine.

I have met many women with careers, households, and even husbands: but I have never met one who couldn't do all that and get the breakfast ready with the other hand, so to speak. Far be it from me to suggest that housekeeping needs some super-sort of brain. Housework we know is repetitive and can be boring, not to say repellent. If men don't like it, I don't blame 'em, but one thing it is not – and that is a wonderful, mysterious cult to be reserved only for women.

The review concludes, rather acerbically, that 'if the boys want to keep on selling it to us they must get some new publicity stuff'.

Horrabin expresses a kind of domestic feminism, born of the radicalization of women in the Labour movement in the 1920s, when the demand for women's voices on the Labour platform was also a demand for men's help in the household. This feminism also tried to speak openly and vigorously of pleasure, including sexual pleasure. In the writing of socialist women like Horrabin, Ellen Wilkinson and Jennie Lee, as well as in the lives they led, there was an attempt to break with the stern Methodist orthodoxy of earlier forms of Labour Party rhetoric and commentary. The interest which Horrabin took in film, then, was less from a concern with cinema as a (positive or negative) instrument of mass persuasion (as discussed by the Socialist Film Council) than from her experience of the fun of filmgoing. Horrabin certainly did follow other socialist reviewers of the wartime period in writing faithful (if rather unenthusiastic) reviews of Soviet propaganda film, but her overwhelming interest was in film as a source of pleasure. At times, Horrabin was aware of the function of such pleasures as distraction and perhaps even as a kind of opium. At other times, however, the fantastic and glitzy character of particular films or stars became a matter for unstinting admiration. Horrabin wrote with the assurance that most films *are* synthetic, and that most audiences know it. But she also valued the fantasies, and delights that Hollywood had added fantasy and pleasure to her own 'real' life and to those of her readers.

In his 1985 lecture on 'Cinema and socialism', Raymond Williams pondered the relationship between the growing labour movement and the mass audiences for film, observing how both were essentially popular, and potentially democratic, developments. But he also points to a second 'more sophisticated' argument to the effect that

film, like socialism itself, was seen as a harbinger of a new kind of world: based on science and technology; fundamentally open and mobile; and thus not only a popular but a dynamic, even a revolutionary medium.²¹

Williams's characteristically ambiguous formulation could be read as suggesting that film was seen by early twentieth-century socialist commentators as being an instrument of social revolution or that individual films were primarily interpreted in terms of their prefigurative contribution to social change. These may have been the preoccupations of the male editorialists and writers of features on the front pages of *Lansbury's Labour Weekly* or the *Tribune*, but such millenarianism seems to take second place in the social and film commentary of Winifred Horrabin and the other women writing in 'the back pages' to a more immediate set of preoccupations. In particular, as I have tried to suggest, film reviews became a vehicle for a practical critique of the organization of everyday life (with respect to domestic labour, the differential access of men and women to leisure, the obstacles to pleasure and fun for all), as well as being, in some sense, a *celebration* of a social-democratic, feminist vision of popular culture as a site for an open, equal and pleasurable community.

In the 1930s and 1940s, of course, the cinema was central to popular leisure; today it does not have the same mass-market significance in Britain (except, perhaps, among teenagers) – television has taken its place. But this is precisely the reason why it is worth rereading Winifred Horrabin – not as a great or even particularly insightful film critic, but as someone who helped to give voice to the sort of popular evaluation of film and now television still to be found in the pages of the *Mirror* and the *Sun*, and who, as a feminist, understood early the importance of taking seriously the ways in which film pleasures fed off and into women's lives.

This paper arises out of ongoing research into the social commentary and writing on popular culture of three socialist feminists who were particularly active in the socialist press in the 1930s and 1940s. Winifred Horrabin, the subject of this paper, was born Winifred Batho in Sheffield in August 1887, daughter of a post-office telegraphist. In the years after World War I, she was active both in Workers' Education and in theatre and art circles: she was the co-author, with her husband Frank Horrabin (the cartographer and cartoonist, and Independent Labour Member of Parliament 1929–33) of a primer on *Working Class Education* (1924). In 1935, at a time of some reaction against women's advances in the Labour Movement (and in the broad society), she published a pamphlet under the title *Is Women's Place in the Home?*. At other times in her varied life (she was abandoned by her husband, with catastrophic effect, in 1943) she wrote and attempted to publish at least three plays, two of them focusing on the life of Lady Carlyle, wife of Thomas Carlyle. In 1967, at the age of eighty, she was contracted by MacGibbon and Kee to write her reminiscences – in the form of what she called a 'collage' – which she eventually entitled, following a phrase from Lord Byron, *The Summer of a Dormouse*. This collage was never finished to Horrabin's satisfaction and has therefore never been published. Winifred Horrabin died in 1970, in poverty, in the National Union of Journalists' old people's home in Leatherhead, Surrey.

I would like to acknowledge the enthusiastic assistance given to me in researching the life and work of Winifred Horrabin by Robert Blatchford of Blackheath, South East London (Winifred Horrabin's friend and companion in the last six years of her life); the late Mr Jeffrey Batho (Winifred's brother) and Rene Batho (her sister-in-law) – both of Sheffield, and Mr Michael Foot MP (who worked closely with Winifred Horrabin at *Tribune* in the 1940s). I would also like to thank Chris Faulkner (Carleton University, Ottawa) for his helpful criticism of this article.

reports and debates

Cinenova: a sign of the times

JULIA KNIGHT

Last October saw the launch of a new London-based women's film distribution company, Cinenova. The new company has come into being through the demise of Circles and Cinema of Women (COW), Britain's two erstwhile feminist film distributors. In the spring of 1990 the British Film Institute informed Circles and COW that substantial cuts were being made to their funding: COW was to be cut by forty per cent and Circles by a massive sixty-five per cent. Threatened with imminent closure, the two organizations launched a press campaign to try and reverse the decision. Several months, consultations and feasibility studies later, COW finally closed its office and Circles reformed into Cinenova, complete with a new image and a twelve-month funding commitment from the BFI.

To many women the BFI's decision to withdraw funding from Circles and COW came as a considerable shock. By the late eighties both organizations appeared to be well established: they had not only built up invaluable libraries of several hundred film and video titles, but had also done much to raise awareness of women's filmmaking, and in the process had achieved enviable public profiles. Of the three branches of the film industry – production, distribution and exhibition – distribution is without doubt the most invisible. Yet time and again Circles and COW attracted press coverage and they had also become well-known among the women's film communities in other countries.¹ Thus, it seemed entirely appropriate for COW to draw attention to their achievements in November 1989 by celebrating ten years 'in the business' with a series of screenings and a seminar discussion at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts.

¹ See, for instance: 'Feminist activities 2', *Time Out*, no. 526 (1980), p. 29; 'Women's film now', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 49, no. 583 (1982), p. 184; 'Breaking down the myths: feminist film distribution today', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 53, no. 624 (1986), pp. 4–5; Amanda Lipman, 'Circulation', *City Limits*, no. 307 (1987), p. 24; Sylvia Hines, 'Feminist distribution: a new phase', *Independent Media*, no. 69 (1987), p. 9; Caroline Merz and Pratibha Parmar, 'Distribution matters: Circles', *Screen*, vol. 28, no. 4, (1987), pp. 66–9; Abina Manning, 'Ten glorious years', *Independent Media*, no. 95 (1990), pp. 10–11.

2 See Jo Imeson, 'Women's film now', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 49, no. 583 (1982), p. 184.

3 As stated in the constitution of COW.

Of course, various factors contributed to this apparent success – not least the initial work of highly committed women such as Lis Rhodes, Felicity Sparrow and Eileen McNulty in the late seventies and early eighties – but a key factor was the development of what has been termed a 'feminist distribution practice'.² Although COW and Circles differed somewhat in their specific focus – COW favouring campaign films and latterly a small number of features, while Circles concentrated on film history and experimental work – both organizations were set up at the end of the seventies to ensure distribution opportunities existed for films and videos directed by women which 'speak from or about the position of women'.³ They also undertook to retain as much control as was possible over the presentation and representation of these films. The need for this was demonstrated when, in the hands of a commercial distributor, Bonnie Klein's film about pornography, *Not a Love Story* (1981), was screened as part of a Soho double-bill porn show. This obviously ran counter to the director's intentions for the film and was a direct result of Klein having no control over the context in which the film was used.

The development of a feminist distribution *practice* gave COW and Circles strong, clearly defined and highly recognizable images as feminist projects. In the early eighties, when feminism appeared to be gaining ground and enjoying a degree of acceptability, this armed the two organizations with a number of advantages. Firstly, it attracted a substantial number of women to place their work with them, secure in the knowledge that it would not be misrepresented or misappropriated; secondly, programmers, educators and viewers first contacted Circles and COW when looking for films informed by a feminist perspective: they knew they would not be palmed off with something unsuitable just to get a booking; and, thirdly, the image was attractive to funders keen to promote equal opportunities in the arts.

The ability of Circles and COW to attract grant-aid was another important factor in their success. Although the founders of Circles had hoped that they would become self-sufficient, it quickly became apparent that the kind of work to which both organizations were committed did not generate enough income to cover operating costs. In fact neither organization put commercial viability among their primary aims. When COW was offered Marleen Gorris's *A Question of Silence* (1982), for instance, they were aware they could have increased the film's chances of commercial success by marketing it as a European art movie. Instead they preferred to concentrate on foregrounding what they perceived to be the film's 'particularly female pleasures' and to hope they would at least cover their costs.⁴ In a similar vein, Circles turned down Sheila McLaughlin's *She Must Be Seeing Things* (1987), which had strong commercial potential, because of what they perceived to be the film's questionable representation of a black woman.

4 See Jane Root, 'Distributing *A Question of Silence*: a cautionary tale', in Charlotte Brunsden (ed.), *Films for Women*, (London: British Film Institute, 1986), pp. 213–23.

Ironically, these two factors in COW's and Circles' success – their strong feminist image and the ability to attract funding – were also the prime reasons for their demise in the early nineties. Due to the high costs involved in film distribution, the relatively small audiences that exist for campaign or experimental films, and the enormous amount of work involved in generating specialist audiences, Circles and COW became heavily dependent on grant-aid for their continued existence. Their work ethic was at odds with the new enterprise culture and the development of incentive funding that emerged in the mid-late eighties.

At the same time, an increasing number of women have begun in recent years to reject the term 'feminist' and to question the benefits of categorizing cultural artefacts made by women on the basis of the gender of their producers. Women filmmakers in particular often found that the inclusion of their films in a women's programme or a women's film festival only functioned to reinforce their marginalization. German video-maker Ulrike Zimmermann, for instance, declared at the end of the eighties that she was 'sick and tired of being shown in the women's block at festivals, usually with the result of being dismissed in some polite, clueless, general review of women's work'.⁵ Others, such as French director Diane Kurys, have even flatly refused to submit their films to women's film festivals: 'Whenever I am asked to be in a book on women directors, or to go to the Créteil International Women's Film Festival, I say no. I say, the day there is a festival of men directors, that day – and only then – I'll go to Créteil.'⁶

Such attitudes have obviously not been without their impact on women's film distributors. At the Créteil festival five years ago a panel of successful women directors was asked if they would put their films with a feminist distributor if one existed in France. Apparently none of them would reply.⁷ In a discussion about her feature film *Virgin Machine* (1988) German director Monika Treut stated that in her search for a British distributor she had approached only Metro Pictures and Electric Pictures. American filmmaker Greta Schiller – whose own film *International Sweethearts of Rhythm* (1986) was lodged with COW – was also present at the discussion and offered the following explanation for Treut's reluctance to consider COW or Circles: 'She really needs a bigger distributor. I mean in terms of the film, *it needs to have a more major distributor, initially, so it is released properly*.' (my emphasis)⁸ As some women (not necessarily all) began to perceive a need to establish themselves as film directors rather than feminist filmmakers, the 'feminist' commitment that characterized Circles and COW became counter-productive.

The restructuring of arts funding and the transition from feminism to what can be loosely termed postfeminism effectively undermined the basis on which COW and Circles rested. So, it is possible to

5 Ulrike Zimmermann, 'Das Subjektive aus dem Mund', in Sabine Perthold (ed.), *Rote Kuesse* (Tuebingen: Verlag Claudia Gehrke, 1990), p. 118.

6 From an interview with Diane Kurys by Ginette Vincendeau, 'Like eating a lot of Madeleines', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol. 58, no. 686 (1991), p. 70.

7 See Merz and Parmar, 'Distribution matters: Circles', p. 68.

8 From an unpublished interview with Monika Treut conducted by the writer, London, 6 November 1988.

9 This quote and all subsequent references attributed to Liane Harris are from an unpublished interview with Harris conducted by the writer, London, 30 July 1991.

argue that the demise of the two organizations in the nineties was inevitable, even if unpopular in certain quarters. Thus, although the new women's film distributor, Cinenova, is based in the offices formerly occupied by Circles, has inherited Circles' film and video library, and is currently negotiating to take over COW's library of material, it is not surprising that it was considered necessary to rename the organization and develop a new image.

The first and most noticeable change has been Cinenova's relinquishing of the feminist image. Whereas the term featured prominently in the publicity material of both Circles and COW, Liane Harris of Cinenova stressed in a pre-launch interview that 'we're definitely not going to have feminism as the key word in our marketing of ourselves. In fact I don't think it's really mentioned anywhere at the moment. Which on the one hand is quite worrying, but on the other hand, I feel people are terrified of this word.'⁹ Instead, the new company has adopted the by-line 'Promoting Films By Women'. This succinctly encapsulates Cinenova's intention of retrieving women's film distribution from its 'feminist' categorization and placing it firmly within the film/video sector. It is also indicative of a desire to highlight and promote the diversity that exists within women's filmmaking, which has all too often been homogenized under the feminist label.

However, this does not mean that all feminist interests and allegiances will disappear – indeed, one potentially exciting area marked out for development is working in conjunction with women's publishers. Another possibility to be explored is the sub-distribution deal with companies which hold films directed by women but are not marketing them effectively to their potential audiences.

Unsurprisingly, the second change places a greater emphasis on commercial viability. Harris explained, for instance, that Cinenova will be 'opening its doors' to work that has far stronger entertainment and commercial appeal in order to make the organization 'much more accessible to a much wider audience'. The company wants to continue distributing educational, issue-based and experimental work, but hopes to use the more mainstream material to build the audience for women's work. Although Harris hopes Cinenova will be in a position to give some films cinema releases, she also believes that video sell-through represents a substantial, as yet untapped source of income.

Although Circles and COW may be missed by many women, Harris and her colleagues at Cinenova have certainly identified some interesting possibilities for women's film distribution. However, at the risk of stating the obvious, identifying them and achieving them are two very different things. Trying to take on more 'accessible' work with more entertainment appeal means Cinenova will have to compete for work with numerous other, more commercial

distributors, who may have more resources at their disposal. And to produce sizeable income from video sell-through will mean extensively raising the profile of women's film work – even after *Circles*¹⁰ and COW's efforts in the eighties, films by women, other than those by the few (such as Penny Marshall) who have broken into more mainstream cinema, remain marginalized in Britain.

One of the problems is that, although women have been working in television, documentary, video and experimental film for a number of years, hardly any (with the notable exceptions of Sally Potter and Lezli-An Barrett) have made the leap into feature-film directing. Obviously, a major reason for this is a lack of investment in the British film industry, which has affected men and women alike. But the presence of women feature-film directors in Britain would undoubtedly give a vital boost to the visibility of women's filmmaking.

Trying to branch into new markets, sustain old ones, *and* actively promote the diversity of women's filmmaking are all highly time-consuming activities and require considerable expertise. As Cinenova, given its current funding and objectives, will remain a small organization, these combined aims are highly ambitious. Furthermore, although it is very important to promote the diversity of women's filmmaking, diverse products imply diverse audiences; and building up a *single* audience for *one* product can be a long, arduous slog. Indeed, on more than one occasion women working in the film and video sectors have argued for not just one or two women's distributors but for several.¹¹

This is not to suggest that Cinenova's plans are necessarily unachievable; but they will without doubt take time, a lot of hard work and, most importantly, money. Even though the new organization has taken on board the issue of commercial viability, Harris is all too aware that Cinenova will continue to require funding in some shape or form for the foreseeable future. Like *Circles* before her, she hopes that Cinenova will eventually become self-supporting, but she equally recognizes that such a transition will be incredibly difficult to effect. Although the company has funding from the BFI until April 1992, there is no guarantee that this will continue and, given the *Circles*/COW saga, one is inclined to be pessimistic. Consequently, Harris feels active and imaginative fundraising will form a crucial element of Cinenova's future work, which is yet another time-consuming task, especially given the limited nature of established funding options available to distributors, such as those set up under the MEDIA 92 scheme.¹¹

In fact, Cinenova, like all arts organizations in the new world of 'enterprise culture', will probably be forced to devote most of its resources to getting itself on a far more commercial footing if it is to survive. The problem with this is, of course, that selection criteria will inevitably change and a whole body of women's campaigning,

¹⁰ See, for instance, Sylvia Hines, 'Feminist distribution: a new phase', *Independent Media*, no. 69 (1987), p. 9; and Merz and Parmar, 'Distribution matters: *Circles*', pp. 67–8.

¹¹ This funding is only available for individual films being distributed in at least three EC countries and covers only fifty per cent of the distributor's costs.

documentary and experimental work may well fall by the wayside – unless it is picked up by organizations like London Video Access, the London Filmmakers' Co-op, Albany Video Distribution or Concord Films Council, which may well be faced with similar problems. Even if Cinenova were to become more commercial, it will still have to find ways of weathering the economic recession, something that is extremely difficult for any small business.

I should stress that these comments are *not* intended as criticisms of Cinenova's plans. In the absence of any other organization in Britain actively promoting films by women, the new company is simply trying to promote the widest possible range of films by women to the widest possible audience in what can only be described as adverse circumstances. Rather, my intention is to foreground the fact that if 'Promoting Films By Women' is to remain a tenable by-line for Cinenova, it will need continued funding support. This begs two questions: how appropriate is the category 'Films By Women', and where will such funding come from?

Unfortunately, the first question is easier to answer than the second. To many people, categorizing films in this way is no longer appropriate. Yet, in view of the continued marginalization of women's work in Britain, an organization like Cinenova which aims to gain wider recognition for films by women as *film work* (as opposed to a manifestation of feminism) undoubtedly has a place in the nineties. It is *still* a common occurrence, when a woman director is present at an after-screening discussion of her work, that she is asked about the feminist content of her film and/or whether she is a feminist director.¹² Without an organization like Cinenova, it is highly likely that most films made by women will remain relegated to a feminist 'ghetto'.

With regard to the second question, funding for a company like Cinenova is bound to remain problematic as long as investment in the British film industry is generally minimal. In countries like Germany and France, which have highly government-subsidized film industries, women have been able to break into feature-film direction and as a result women's filmmaking enjoys a far higher profile. So much so in fact, that German video-maker Claudia Richarz has argued that in Germany there is now no need for a women's film distributor.¹³ However, by subsidizing production, the German government recognized very early on the accompanying need to subsidize distribution (and exhibition) – otherwise there was no guarantee that state-subsidized films would reach the cinemas. One can only hope that as we move towards a United Europe the British government will be embarrassed or prompted into making a similar, belated intervention into our own film industry.

¹² This happened as recently as November 1991 when Argentinian film director Mercedes Frutos presented her film *Another Hope* (1991) at the London Film Festival.

¹³ From an unpublished interview with Claudia Richarz conducted by the writer, Hamburg, 20 February 1989.

debate

What is 'flexible' about independent producers?

KEVIN ROBINS AND JAMES CORNFORD

One of the most significant developments in recent television history has been the growth of the independent production sector. In the 1970s, there were only a tiny number of independent production companies supplying British broadcasters, mainly vehicles for individual star presenters; at the beginning of the 1990s, a trawl through the various trade directories reveals that there are over eight-hundred companies in the sector in Britain. Effectively created by the decision to establish Channel Four in 1982 as a 'publisher-contractor' broadcaster, the independent production sector was boosted in 1987 by the Home Office's decision to impose quotas of twenty-five per cent independent production on the BBC and on the ITV companies.

And it is by no means just a British development. The logic of independent production has been gathering momentum in Europe, particularly within the European Community. In 1989, article five of the Council of Ministers' directive on broadcasting laid down that 'where practicable and by appropriate means', broadcasters should 'reserve at least ten per cent of their transmission time . . . or . . . at least ten per cent of their programme budget, for European works created by producers who are independent of broadcasters'.¹ Within Europe, these producers are expected to make a growing contribution to the schedules of those broadcasters from whom they are 'independent'.

'Independent production' is about much more than just a new source of television programmes. It also appeals to a new ethos in broadcasting. Independents are seen as the carriers of diversity and

¹ 'Council Directive of 3 October 1989 on the Coordination of Certain Provisions Laid Down by Law, Regulation or Administrative Action in Member States Concerning the Pursuit of Broadcasting Activities' (89/552/EEC), *Official Journal of the European Communities*, L298, 17 October 1989, p. 27.

- 2 André Lange and Jean-Luc Renaud, *The Future of the European Audiovisual Industry* (Manchester: European Institute for the Media, 1989), p. 241.

innovation in programmes and in programme-making methods; they are welcomed as harbingers of 'flexibility', and as the basis for a new regime of growth in the audiovisual industries based on 'flexible specialization'; and this flexibility is then held up as the way to a more diverse media geography in a future Europe of the regions. Independent production is projected as a 'third force' in broadcasting, one that brings with it new forms of expression along with gains in quality and creativity.

The clear appeal of independent production is based on 'the idea that "small is beautiful", on the excess of energy which small businesses have to spend in order to survive', and this, it is suggested, 'makes possible new dynamics, which are not constrained by the built-in rigidities of the system'.² In a business where the alternatives have always seemed to be between large public monopolies and large private monopolies, it is easy to understand how the idea of a diverse sector of small companies could be seen as heralding new possibilities for media access, pluralism and democracy. It is easy to understand how small might be seen as beautiful. What we must ask ourselves, then, is what this 'flexibility' of the independent production sector is actually about. Is it really about the emergence of a third force in broadcasting?

Flexible futures

There has been a surprisingly broad consensus that independent production has been a source of both cultural innovation and industrial flexibility in the television industry. In its 1988 White Paper, *Broadcasting in the '90s: Competition, Choice and Quality*, the Thatcher government claimed that 'independent producers constitute an important source of originality and talent which must be exploited [sic] and have brought new pressures for efficiency and flexibility in production procedures'. With this in mind, the White Paper proposed that 'there should be a greater separation between the various functions that make up broadcasting and have in the past been carried out by one organisation'.³ It was in order to counter the 'excessive degree of vertical integration', which the Government saw as generating rigidities in the British television industry, that the 1990 Broadcasting Act gave statutory force to the twenty-five per cent independent production quota for all terrestrial broadcasters. For the Government, support for independent producers was associated with breaking up the 'cosy duopoly' and creating a new era of 'flexibility' and 'choice' in broadcasting.

This core idea advanced by the Government in the White Paper and in the following legislation – flexibility through vertical disintegration – has also been at the heart of a different kind of radical perspective on broadcasting. Like the Thatcher government,

- 3 *Broadcasting in the '90s: Competition Choice and Quality*, Cm. 517 (London: HMSO, 1988), pp. 41, 6.

4 Robin Murray, 'Ownership, control and the market', *New Left Review*, no. 164 (1987), pp. 107-8.

5 Susan Christopherson and Michael Storper, 'The effects of flexible specialisation on industrial politics and the labour market: the motion picture industry', *Industrial and Labour Relations Review*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1989), p. 334. See also Michael Storper, 'The transition to flexible specialisation in the US film industry: external economies, the division of labour, and the crossing of industrial divides', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1989), pp. 273-305. For a critique of this view of the industrial dynamics of Hollywood see Asu Aksoy and Kevin Robins, 'Hollywood for the 21st century: global competition for critical mass in image markets', *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 1-22.

6 Nicholas Abercrombie, Scott Lash, Celia Lury and Dan Shapiro, 'Flexible specialisation in the cultural industries', paper presented to the Workshop on Flexible Specialisation in Europe, Zurich, 25-6 October 1990, p. 12.

7 John Keane, *The Media and Democracy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 157.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 156.

many on the Left were also tired of what they saw as the rigid, inflexible and bureaucratic methods of mass service delivery associated with 'Fordist' broadcasting. Arguing that 'the public sector has by and large been arid ground for innovation', Robin Murray has invoked 'the Channel Four model . . . i.e., contracting with independent programme-makers on the basis of funds drawn from mainline services' as an alternative to the 'inflexibility of the great public institutions like the BBC'.⁴ Thatcher's neo-liberal agenda, with its language of flexibility, was seen as actually opening up possibilities that could be appropriated by a New Times Left, equally, though more progressively, committed to the flexible future.

From this perspective, the proliferation of independent programme producers during the course of the 1980s was a good example of a more general shift from the era of 'Fordism', – characterized by the dominance of large, vertically integrated corporations – to a coming 'post-Fordist' era of broadcasting characterized by the vertical disintegration of large corporations and the emergence of a complex division of labour between a myriad of small and specialized firms. This was precisely the model for the GLC's cultural industries strategy in the early 1980s and for various 'Media City' initiatives in the rest of Britain. Even in what we might regard as the limit case, Hollywood, the argument was made that with 'the decline of the studio system and the rise of flexible specialization', the majors were losing their predominance and small firms were coming to occupy a central role in the industry.⁵

Flexible specialization has seemed to promise a new political pluralism and cultural diversity, maybe a kind of socialism after Fordism. There is a sense that the increase in demand for programming from independent producers is even tending 'to alter the terms of trade in their favour' and 'could leave them a bit more space to produce critical quality television'.⁶ On this basis, it seems as if the independents could then come to play a major role in promoting media democracy. John Keane has recently put the case, arguing that 'greater public support is needed for small production companies which operate within a regulated market and work to distinctive programming remits (as in the Channel Four model in Britain)'.⁷ He appeals to a revived public-service regime in which the dangers of state and market monopolies are counterbalanced by what he calls a 'non-market-non-state' sector of the media. Thereby 'legal and financial encouragement could be given to guarantee rights of access during certain hours to individuals, groups and independent programme-makers', and so it becomes possible to 'build the electronic equivalent to Speakers Corner'.⁸ Again, independents are associated with a 'third way', a future for broadcasting beyond market and state monopoly.

The rise of independent production has seemed to be not only desirable, but also to reflect the post-Fordist way the world was

going anyway. A powerful economic and cultural logic is apparently at work, moving us from mass producers to flexible artisans, from cultural conformity to creative diversity, and from media monopoly to democratic pluralism. This has been the ideal, but it is an ideal that reality has stubbornly refused to fulfil.

Flexibility against independence

This faith in flexibility has sustained a radical agenda – for conservatives and socialists alike – through the 1980s. But flexibility was always an ambiguous ideal, and there was a darker side to this project for flexible specialization in the broadcasting industry. If Channel Four sought alternative programming sources, its remit was never to sustain the economic well-being of the independent sector. As the Channel's first chief executive put it, 'we were charged to provide a distinctive service first and foremost, not principally to sustain a viable business sector. . . . We saw independent producers as a source of diversity, as a help towards the fulfilment of our pluralist purpose rather than primarily as businesses.'⁹ But what is such cultural diversity and pluralism without business viability?

From the point of view of the British television production industry, Channel Four was tailored to maximize the use of productive resources – capital and labour. As a highly regulated and protected industry, broadcasting had, by the 1980s, generated a considerable degree of 'slack'. In the ITV companies, in particular, both facilities and staff were widely seen as under-used assets. Channel Four commissions were a new and significant source of demand for programmes to fill the spare capacity of the ITV system. In 1989–90, the ITV companies and ITN, which they own, produced twenty-five per cent of Channel Four transmissions.¹⁰

In the early days of Channel Four, the independent sector, too, represented a mechanism for harnessing existing, but under-used, resources, those which had been established outside the broadcasting organizations. On the one hand, there were technical facilities and creative talent which had been fostered in the feature-film industry, by radical film and video-makers, and in the corporate video sector; and, on the other hand, an extensive pool of freelance labour had developed across the audiovisual industries. In response to the financial stimulus of Channel Four commissions, these resources could be harnessed by the independent producer to create a diverse range of programmes. And, what is more, these programmes could be produced relatively cheaply because the independent producers were unencumbered by the overheads which go with having large permanent staffs and in-house technical facilities. In this early period, then, flexibility and diversity could to some extent coexist.

But this situation could not last. As demand for independent

⁹ Jeremy Isaacs, *Storm Over 4: A Personal Account* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), p. 108.

¹⁰ Independent Broadcasting Authority, *Annual Report and Accounts 1989/90* (London: IBA, 1990), p. 23.

production grew, supply grew faster, bringing about intensified competition within the sector. This competitive environment, offering the broadcasters an alternative source of programmes, enabled them to restructure their own activities in order to attain higher levels of efficiency (for example, by introducing accurate cost accounting for programmes, through divisionalization and the introduction of internal markets, and through an increasing reliance on freelancers). Jonathan Davis captures the essence of this change: 'from being considered a progressive force in television . . . with the accent on "new voices", independent producers have come to be seen by many within the television industry – including some producers themselves – as agents of rationalization'.¹¹

The effects of this rationalization have dissolved the equation between economic flexibility and cultural innovation. Rationalization rebounded against the independents as the main role for the sector shifted 'away from making new kinds of programmes towards making the same kinds of programmes more cheaply'.¹² Cost-cutting rather than creativity has come to the top of the independents' agenda as the broadcasters have been increasingly able to lay down strict quality guidelines and to force the independents to compete on price. Further, the impact of rationalization extends to fundamental aspects of the sector as a whole. Perhaps most importantly, there has been a rapid casualization of the labour force in British television. According to a recent union survey the majority of television workers are now freelancers for the first time.¹³ Because freelancers face insurmountable problems in getting training and re-training, there are doubts about the industry's capacity to reproduce itself.¹⁴ (And there is nothing very flexible, creative or diverse about that.)

If the cultural remit of Channel Four brought into being what Jeremy Isaacs has described as 'a modest new production sector of British industry'¹⁵ during the early 1980s, the existence of this new sector in its original spirit has never been assured. The 'pluralist purpose' of Channel Four was built on a precarious economic basis. If, for a brief moment, the new economic flexibility sustained an outburst of cultural diversity, this was a short-lived moment. In the long run, the logic of economic flexibility would work against diversity and choice. Now, in the 1990s, the sense that the climate of creativity has been undermined is associated with a 'Crisis on Four'.¹⁶

The limits to independence

What the broadcasters purchase when they commission programmes from independent producers are the rights to the programme. When the independent sector was set up around Channel Four, the

11 Jonathan Davis, *TV, UK: A Special Report* (Peterborough: Knowledge Research, 1991), p. 76. See also Jonathan Davis, 'The quality of diversity', paper presented to the Fourth International Television Studies Conference, London, 24 July 1991.

12 Ibid.

13 Bill Granger, *The Casualisation of the Membership of the Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians*, (London: Centre for Communication and Information Studies, Policy Paper, no. 2, March 1991).

14 See Carol Varlaam et al. *Skill Search: Television, Film and Video Industry Employment Patterns and Training Needs* (2 vols) (Brighton: Institute for Manpower Studies, IMS Reports nos 171 & 186, 1989).

15 Isaacs, *Storm Over 4*, p. 107.

16 William Leith, 'Crisis on 4', *Independent on Sunday*, 15 September 1991.

Channel agreed to 'terms of trade' which formalized the relationship between it and the independent producers' trade association (IPPA). Jeremy Isaacs describes them thus:

In the case of fully financed programmes, the channel would meet the entire costs of production and post-production, including fees to the programme-makers. It would also, on completion, on time and on budget, pay a production fee or profit calculated as a percentage of the budget, ranging normally from ten per cent to fifteen per cent, over and above the total programme cost. For this the channel would obtain the right to UK transmissions and would divide the residual exploitation of rights with the supplier, seventy per cent to us, thirty per cent to them. IPPA thought this too harsh a division. Later it was modified in some cases to sixty per cent/forty per cent.¹⁷

In return for fully pre-financing the production, the broadcaster retains exclusive transmission rights. At the end of the production, the independent producer has only a production fee to sustain his or her company until the next commission comes in.

Given the fact that the broadcaster controls the rights, and given the absence of an established domestic secondary market (a market for repeats), the possibility of the 'residual exploitation of rights' amounting to a meaningful revenue stream is extremely unlikely in most cases.¹⁸ Independent production companies remain without assets; without assets companies cannot raise the capital necessary to pre-finance their own productions and thus retain the rights; and without the rights, the company cannot get an asset base.

The 'flexibility' in this regime of subcontracting works against any really meaningful status of independence for the producer. As Isaacs recognized in the very early days of Channel Four:

The fact is that the only independent producer who has total control over his programme is one wealthy enough to make the programme without pre-sale having been arranged. Anyone else has to take account of the needs of the purchaser.¹⁹

Those companies wealthy enough not to have to take account of the 'needs of the purchaser' are few. For the great majority, flexibility is, in reality, about adapting to the needs of those who exercise control over the distribution outlets. There is always only a thin line between the condition of these independent companies and the situation of those in the freelance or casual labour market. In so far as these 'flexible' terms of trade have been adapted and taken up by the other broadcasters, the situation of most independents remains as precarious as ever.

17 Isaacs, *Storm Over 4*, p. 109.

18 On the issue of retention of rights and the possibility of a secondary market see John Howkins, 'Europe's primary problem', *Broadcast*, 12 January 1990, 24-5; Peter Goodwin, 'Doing the rights thing', *Broadcast*, 10 October 1991, pp. 44-5.

19 Quoted in Stephen Lambert, *Channel 4: Television with a Difference* (London: British Film Institute, 1982), p. 152.

Logics of integration

For these small producers the future is uncertain. For many it will be a matter of eking out a living from smaller and more infrequent commissions. What seems clear, after the euphoria of the 1980s, is how misguided was the belief that the small could and would inherit the airwaves. There was never really any question of a shift from oligopoly to independents. What was at stake was a restructuring of broadcasting to ensure competitive conditions in new international markets. And, as Steven Ross puts it, in this process of transformation 'size is not unimportant':

Mass is critical, if it is combined with vertical integration and the combination is intelligently managed. The importance of a large, vertically integrated operation in your home country cannot be emphasized enough for it enables you to build globally . . . the diversified structure of a broad vertically integrated company makes sense.

'Quite simply', as Ross puts it, 'by integrating you have more insurance financially.'²⁰

A recent European Commission publication is equally straightforward: 'it seems inevitable that the European audiovisual scene will be dominated in the not too distant future by a few giants controlling the whole spectrum of sector segments, from production to distribution'.²¹ The restructuring process over the last ten years has ultimately been about new terms of integration. Broadcasters and independents, alike, have had to learn that this is the logic that they must live with if they are to survive in a new media order dominated by the likes of Time Warner, Bertelsmann, Murdoch and Sony.

In this new competitive environment, the broadcasters have come to realize that market relations with external suppliers can be an effective means of both cutting costs and exercising control. What, in fact, seems to be emerging as the most effective arrangement is a kind of half-way house, a modified market system which can generate a mix of competition and stability. Broadcasters are establishing new forms of relationship with small numbers of 'core suppliers' through mechanisms including equity shares, output deals (agreements to take a given volume of output over a given period) and 'sweetheart deals' (giving an informal favoured supplier status to ex-employees). Through these mechanisms, new kinds of 'tight-loose' relationship are being established between the independents and the broadcasters. We might describe them as forms of *flexible integration*. One option for the independents is to simply recognize the limits to independence, and to come to terms with this new power structure. Another option, open to just a few, has been to grow, invariably with the backing of resource-rich sponsors. What

²⁰ Steven J. Ross, 'Time Warner worldview address', delivered to the Edinburgh International Television Festival, 26 August 1990, p. 10.

²¹ Matteo Maggiore, *Audiovisual Production in the Single Market* (Luxembourg: Office for the Official Publications of the European Communities, 1990), p. 79.

²² *Submission to the Home Office by the Independent Programme Producers Association in response to the Broadcasting White Paper*, February 1989, p. 11.

²³ Margaret Heffernan and John Woodward quoted in Charles Brown, 'PACT – the complete guide', *Television Week*, 3 October 1991, pp. 12, 13.

²⁴ We should note, however, that a formal legal definition of an independent programme producer did not exist until the announcement of *The Broadcasting (Independent Productions) Order 1991*, Statutory Instrument no. 1408, 18 June 1991.

²⁵ Jake Eberts and Terry Illott, *My Indecision is Final: The Rise and Fall of Goldcrest Films* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 104–5.

these 'super indies' are aiming to do is to develop their own empires through integration on their own terms. By the late 1980s, a small number of larger companies were consolidating, and a few of these had plans to integrate forward into programme distribution and even broadcasting. There is, it seems, no future without integration.

As recently as 1989, IPPA was arguing that 'competition and efficiency would be best achieved through a reduction of vertical integration'.²² By 1991, the director of the Producers' Alliance for Cinema and Television (PACT, formed in 1991 by a merger of IPPA and The Producers' Association) was, significantly, much more ambivalent, arguing that 'the industry can go back to being vertically integrated as well as forward to the publishers/broadcasters model' while her Chief Executive was looking to the model of Hollywood where the strength of the studios is based on 'vertical integration between the functions of film production, distribution and exhibition'.²³

Of course, vertical integration within British broadcasting (narrowly defined) is limited by legislation and regulation.²⁴ The independents are, however, caught up in a bigger pattern of change across the media and culture industries more generally. In this broader context, some key independent production companies have come to function as 'Trojan horses', enabling non-television media groups to penetrate into the broadcasting sector. One well-documented example is the (ultimately unsuccessful) attempt by the publishing giant Pearson Longman to use the various Goldcrest companies to build up a presence in the audiovisual industries in the mid 1980s.²⁵ Successful examples include Carlton Communications' use of the Zenith stable of independents to win the London weekday Channel Three licence, and the Guardian and Manchester Evening News Group's control over the Broadcast Communications group of independents which was important to their part in the successful Channel Three breakfast franchise bid.

The geography of independents

One of the most important issues to emerge from this whole period of upheaval and change has been the development of production capacity away from London. And in this endeavour it is again the independent producers who have been given a starring role. The independent sector has seemed to promise a decentralization and devolution of broadcasting activity. Its 'new voices' would be Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish and English regional voices. Flexible specialization was also about a new geography of broadcasting.

With the introduction of Channel Four a significant number of small, independent production companies established themselves outside the capital. What was significant was that this development

26 Alan Cochrane, *Developing Local Economic Strategies* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987).

27 Greater London Council, *The London Industrial Strategy* (London: Greater London Council, 1985), p. 179.

of embryonic independent-television production activities in the regions coincided with the emergence of distinctive new urban and regional development strategies variously described as 'interventionist', 'radical' or 'local socialist'. These strategies tended to emphasize the networking of flexibly specialized and locally owned small firms as the most likely basis on which to generate economic growth and long term benefits.²⁶ And the independent programme production sector was made up of precisely the grouping of small firms which was envisaged as the core of a newly revitalized, diversified and technologically advanced local economy. In the mid 1980s, many British local authorities and other development agencies set about establishing media-development programmes aiming to put their local areas on the map as 'Media Cities'.

Most of these media-development strategies were, directly or indirectly, modelled on the amalgam of industrial and cultural policy that had been developed by the Greater London Council in its London Industrial Strategy. The cultural industries had been identified by the GLC as a key sector for the capital's economy and for enhancing its 'quality of life'. While it was aware of the huge concentrations of power exercised by large multinational companies within this sector, the GLC suggested that it was possible to discern the 'faltering emergence of a regime of "flexible specialization"' based on 'the growth of a new generation of small independent cultural producers'.²⁷ What was necessary, the GLC argued, was a programme of support – shared marketing and distribution agencies for example – that would help these small companies to reach a wider market.

This model of support for networks of small production companies and their suppliers rapidly spread to Britain's major provincial cities and regions. Media-development initiatives were established in Cardiff, Sheffield, Birmingham, Liverpool and Newcastle. Chiming with the rise of the urban-regeneration agenda from the mid 1980s, support for clusters of audiovisual firms was increasingly directed into the creation of cultural-industries quarters, media zones and media centres which, it was thought, could help to foster the dense transactional networks and inter-firm cooperation which were understood to be the basis for the flexible specialization growth pattern.

In retrospect, the weaknesses of these local media strategies are apparent. They never came to terms with the centre-periphery dynamic in the cultural industries. With a remarkable disregard for the specificities of place, the strategy which the GLC had developed to support a pattern of growth in London, the core, was blithely transferred to the periphery. While attention was given to the relationships between various companies concerned with the production of audiovisual material, the all-important links between

independent production and the broadcasters proved more impervious to local intervention. Without the means to articulate local production with national and international distribution, local media industries found themselves trapped within a narrow regional market. In this situation it was extremely hard to develop the critical mass necessary to sustain a viable regional industry.

The evidence leads us to conclude that independent production is, and is likely to remain, primarily a London affair. A study published in 1989 found that, of 459 independents surveyed, seventy-three per cent were based in London and the south east, and that these companies were generally larger than their provincial colleagues. Of the fifteen independents which act as core suppliers for Channel Four, only two have a significant presence outside central London. And, finally, the main independent suppliers to the BBC and ITV show almost as dramatic a concentration of London companies.²⁸

What is more, there is a distinct possibility that this concentration will increase. A significant part of the activity which did emerge in the regions was centred around companies operating under the Channel Four/ACCT Workshop Agreement which guaranteed them revenue funding. As Channel Four's support has waned, these 'workshop' producers have become more marginal to the development of the sector and there is little sign of their decline being made up for by the occasional subsidiary of a major London company opening up in the provinces. If anything, independent production is *more* concentrated in London than in-house ITV activity or even, possibly, than the centralized BBC.

Diverse productions?

Undoubtedly, the introduction of independents into British television has allowed in some new voices. The proclaimed diversity of the sector can, however, be easily overstated. In simple numerical terms, the fact that, for example, in 1989–90, Channel Four commissioned programmes from 526 independent production companies for a total budget of £104.3 millions, would suggest that there is a thriving sector of companies. The majority of that programming, however, came from a small number of companies. Just 29 received more than £1,000,000 in programme payments, while 336 of the total received less than £101,000.²⁹ Independent production for the BBC and for ITV is similarly concentrated in a few hands.

Whether the output from the 'new voices' is innovative and whether it truly reflects cultural diversity is a moot point. Evidence from the United States suggests that independent producers do not necessarily enjoy more freedom to produce creative television programmes than in-house producers who are under the direct

²⁸ See Varlaam et al, *Skill Search: Television, Film and Video Industry Employment Patterns and Training Needs* (vol. 1). The 'core suppliers' are identified in Jonathan Davis, *TV, UK: A Special Report*, and their location is taken from trade directories.

²⁹ Channel Four Television, *Annual Report and Accounts 1989/90*, pp. 14, 17.

control of broadcasting executives. Recent investigation into scope for creativity in the US television industry (where production companies are large and do retain the rights to the programmes) has found that the creation of a market for television production 'both opens up more places to which creative programme-makers can take their wares *and* generates pressures to shunt them back onto more mainstream paths'. The researchers conclude that

the present system could be likened to an elaborate rocket, which has reached the apogee of its exploratory trajectory without escaping the earth's gravitational field and which is now being pulled back down towards mediocrity, conformity and concentrations of power.³⁰

In the film industry, too, there is evidence that the survival of independents depends on their ability to mimic the output of the majors. In the case of companies like Carolco, writes Peter Biskind, 'we're not talking quality, nor aesthetic risk-taking'. If they are to compete with the majors, such independent companies are obliged to 'populate their movies with Kevins and Arnolds'.³¹

If, in the early days of independent production in Britain, programme-makers would approach Channel Four with ideas, it is now the case that the broadcasters are tending to lay down strict guidelines for the programme content that they expect to get from independents. And, as the broadcasters become increasingly compelled to compete for audiences and revenue after 1992, they will inevitably be forced to place a high priority on commissioning low-cost, high-audience programmes in volumes suitable for strip-scheduling (and thus more attractive on the international programme market) rather than the one-off documentaries which have in the past been the speciality of many of the smaller independent companies. Commercial pressures are, then, increasingly circumscribing the potential for creativity from independents.

What is absolutely clear is that economies of scale are as crucial as ever to the strategies of any media organization wanting to compete in the new global media markets of the 1990s and beyond. And what is clear, too, is that economies of scale will necessarily come into conflict with considerations of media democracy and pluralism. A recent report from the Council of Europe's working group on media concentration recognized that concentration of power in the hands of a few media conglomerates 'can menace the free expression of others and can affect cultural diversity'.³² Business as usual, you might say. To see the independents as key element of a new order, of a 'post-capitalist civil society',³³ as John Keane does, seems to us almost fanciful in the light of the logics of (re-) integration that are now exerting themselves.

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30 Jay G. Blumler and Carolyn Martin Spicer, 'Prospects for creativity in the new television marketplace: evidence from program-makers', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1990), pp. 90, 98.

31 Peter Biskind, 'Going for broke', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 1, no. 6 (1991), p. 6.

32 'Rapport de Synthèse sur la Concentration des Médias en Europe', 3me Conférence ministérielle européenne sur la politique des communications de masse, Nicosia, 9-10 October 1991, p. 4.

33 Keane, *The Media and Democracy*, p. 152

report

Animation Studies Conference, Rochester, October 1991

LISA CARTWRIGHT

The Society for Animation Studies was formed four years ago in part as a response to the fact that academic work on studio and independent animation had reached something of a critical mass. As Society chair Harvey Deneroff explained, while animation studies lagged far behind film studies in the academy, the field had been dominated by male animation buffs and their publications. Joining the overlapping circles of academics and buffs in the Society is a third group, a contingent of animators interested in promoting serious academic study of animation culture. However, despite a recent membership drive (targeted in large part at the US-based Society for Cinema Studies), the SAS membership of 140 has taken on an unfortunate characteristic shared by academia and animation culture 'buff' tradition: it is overwhelmingly (if not completely) white and over two-thirds male, a ratio that also describes the group of about eighty to one hundred conference participants and the forty papers presented at the Society's Third Annual Conference.

The conference, held at the Rochester Institute of Technology (an institution frequently in US news this past year for its financial and professional ties to US Central Intelligence Agency research), brought together a homogeneous group of people with widely divergent agenda, definitions and strategies. Conference papers represented a variety of disciplines, many of them remarkably untouched by current issues and methods in film and cultural studies. Bugs Bunny served as a vehicle for an anthropologist's critique of structuralism, a history of World War II animation-studio promotionals for government war bonds, and an institutional

analysis of Disney Studio–National Film Board of Canada politics. Psychologists discussed therapeutic and educational uses of cel and laser disc animation; Leslie Bishko, a dancer, talked about a method of computer analysis used to establish an index of the emotive content of body movements. The range of projects represented suggests that the very constitution of the field of animation studies, and of animation as a genre or an institution, is an issue deserving of some attention.

An optimistic view of this scene is that it is eclectic, and that strategies developed outside film studies are welcome because they present new critical models that challenge the film-studies canon. Some of the more compelling work presented at the conference were those papers that used strategies from the social sciences and other fields to engage concepts and theories that have become axiomatic in film studies. Papers by Richard Leskosky, Harvey Deneroff and Robin Allan were detailed historiographical studies. Basing his paper on empirical industry and audience research that was not explicitly discussed, Eric Smoodin raised the methodological question of the role of the theatre film bill in cinema spectatorship. He suggested that the overall theatre programme, which included cartoons and other shorts in addition to a feature film, played an important role in the constitution of spectators according to race, gender and class. Smoodin emphasized the cinema's organization of spectatorship across an intertextual field of film forms, social identities and contexts rather than around the narrative feature film alone. This foregrounding of the bill's formal and textual diversity explicitly challenges the cinema-studies emphasis on the single narrative feature film. Interestingly, animation was not featured in this paper, but was identified as only one element among others in the filmgoing event. Disappointingly, audience response to this paper (and others) tended to focus on points of historical fact, missing the point of the methodological interventions it attempted to make.

Research on audience and marketing strategies also informed Richard deCordova's paper on Disney's address to child spectators. Continuing in the vein of his recent *Camera Obscura* essay on ethnography, exhibition practices and child audiences, deCordova looked at Mickey Mouse's emergence as a children's icon and identificatory figure.¹ By emphasizing the central role of tie-ins and department-store displays in this process, deCordova raised some important questions about intertextuality and the role of extracinematic culture in processes like character identification – 'What does it mean for a child to be a mouse?' he asked. By raising questions about the nature of preoedipal audience processes, visual abstraction and animality, deCordova's paper did not so much break with psychoanalytic models of film theory as challenge some presuppositions about industry parameters, textuality and spectatorship.

1 Richard deCordova, 'Ethnography and exhibition: the child audience, the Hays Office and Saturday Matinees', *Camera Obscura*, vol. 23 (1990), pp. 91–108.

Papers by Russell George and Lev Manovich engaged with semiotic film theory to analyse animation's formal conventions. While George's paper focused on the structure and operation of punning in Warner Brothers shorts, Manovich considered the broad history of film theoretical work on realism and technology over the past two decades (Baudry, Metz, Comolli) with an eye to the development of contemporary computer animation and its graphic and pictorial conventions. Manovich relied on recent art historical work on vision, language and technical culture (Norman Bryson, Jonathan Crary, Paul Virilio) to modify and problematize the film-theory works he discussed, as well as to formulate an approach to computer-graphics codes and processes that both draw on and contradict live-action filmic conventions. Manovich's attention to the contemporary computer industry and its place in the production of popular cultural form indicates an important area oddly under-represented at the conference.

A very small number of papers addressed contemporary animation. Filmmaker Sharon Couzins's paper on contemporary women animators was an important contribution here. Even fewer considered animation in the industrial or educational context. David Erlich's very interesting paper on the use of animation in psychotherapy was unfortunately presented during a lunch-hour panel. The marginalization of these areas was rather disconcerting, given that issues of magazines like *Computer Graphics World* and *Scientific American* are filled with articles proclaiming the value and future of animation both inside and outside the entertainment context (when is the last time you saw a new film that did not include special-effects graphics; where would Gulf War flight strategies have been without animation?). Indeed, one of the two Rochester Institute of Technology buildings in which the conference was held is a new Center for Imaging Sciences, housing a programme that includes animation among the many imaging techniques under development for military and industrial applications. Yet close to half of the total of forty conference presentations focused on the US studio context, eleven of these on Disney or Warner Brothers alone. Only two papers foregrounded gender (Couzins's paper and a paper by J. P. Williams on Lois Lane), and only one concentrated on race and ethnicity (Steven Carr spoke on media images of Jews). Where these issues were foregrounded, they were more often than not raised to identify sex and race bias and to expose the presence of stereotyping. These projects demonstrated little familiarity with recent discussions of the methodology and politics of critical practice in media and cultural studies.

Last year a call for papers on race and gender preceded the conference. At least one organizer voiced the lament that the papers were largely disappointing, and the call was not repeated this year.

For the Society to function as something more than the promotional organ of industry practices and the legitimator of animation as an art form, it is critical that its governing body consider some of the problems around ghettoizing these issues, and reconsider its own institutional structure, standards and policies. It is significant that the newsletter distributed at the conference made public the fact that the prize committee found no undergraduate essays that met their standards of 'good writing', 'originality', and 'excellence'. It seems that the desire to give academic credibility to animation studies has surpassed any willingness to recognize the fact that the constituency of the Society includes a number of younger (college-age) fans eager to pursue animation studies (including two teenagers who travelled seven hours by car to attend the conference), and that these and other individuals (including myself) may find the standard codes of scholarly 'excellence' unsuited to their agenda. I found this published statement abhorrent. Disappointingly, the judges seem not to have read works in cultural studies (Hebdige, Penley, and so on) that provide students/fans/animators with some anti-universalist and politically enabling approaches to the study of popular culture.

Film screenings held at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography's Dryden Theater were the highlight of the conference. Eastman House film archivists Jan-Christopher Horak and Paolo Cherchi-Usai programmed two nights of rarely seen early works including Lotte Reiniger's painstakingly detailed and gorgeous silhouette cut-out animation, a live-action film of animator Lanislaw Starewicz, and some US studio animation dating back to the teens (including a recently restored print of Gregory LaCava's 1919 animated *Breath of a Nation*). Skip Bataglia's programming of recent US east-coast independent animation and the additional screenings of work by filmmaker Faith Hubley, who was a featured speaker and guest at the conference, were a welcome break from the industry focus represented in papers. It is hoped that in future conferences this attention to independents will include a more international and cross-cultural focus, with attention to some more politically oriented animators such as Ayoka Chenzira, whose numerous animated films have received recognition in the context of independent educational, women's and African-American cinema.

Next year's conference may be held at California Institute of Technology, a school with strong financial ties to Disney Studios. It will be interesting to see to what extent organizers will be willing to break with the tradition of industry cheerleading.

debate

Early German cinema: audiences, style and paradigms

THOMAS ELSAESSER

Famous for changing film historians' view of early American cinema, the Pordenone 'Days of Silent Cinema'¹ were in 1990 devoted to German cinema, continuing the retrospectives of different European cinemas – Denmark and Sweden in 1986, Russia in 1989. Called 'Before Caligari', the German retrospective was not without a polemical edge, as the introductory essay of the catalogue makes clear.² The editors argue against the prevailing view that, with one or two exceptions such as *Der fremde Vogel* (Urban Gad, 1911) and *Der Student von Prag* (Stellan Rye, 1913), nothing of significance had been produced in Germany before 1918. They also imply that the emphasis on haunted screens and demonic doctors had seriously marginalized other equally distinctive films and genres. The standard authorities on the subject, Siegfried Kracauer³ and Lotte Eisner,⁴ are still the main sources for denigrating the 1910s, but they were neither the first⁵ nor the only ones to do so: most general film histories, when surveying developments in Europe, usually come to Germany only after World War I, because its 'golden age' conveniently arrives, like in a baton relay, after the heyday of British cinema around the turn of the century, the French cinema's world-leading position up to 1914, and the brief but remarkable flourishing of the Danish and Swedish cinemas between 1909 and 1916.⁶

Writing so closely after the defeat of Nazism, political choices dictated that Kracauer and Eisner should focus on the films of the Weimar Republic. They had an additional handicap which made it difficult to do original research on the earlier period: they were

- 1 'Le giornate del cinema muto' have been organized annually since 1981 by the Cineteca di Friuli, under the directorship of Livio Jacob and Paolo Cherchi Usai. Lorenzo Codelli, Piero Colussi, Andrea Crozzoli, Carlo Montanaro, Piera Patat and Davide Turconi.
- 2 Paolo Cherchi Usai and Lorenzo Codelli (eds), *Primo Caligari/Before Caligari* (Pordenone: Biblioteca dell'Imaginaire, 1990), pp. 12–29.
- 3 Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947).
- 4 Lotte Eisner, *The Haunted Screen* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1973).
- 5 Herbert Tannenbaum seems to have been one of the first to denigrate early German cinema. See H. Diederichs (ed.), *Der Filmtheoretiker Herbert Tannenbaum* (Frankfurt: Filmuseum, 1987).
- 6 See, for instance, Eric Rhode, *A History of the Cinema from its Origins to 1970* (London: Penguin Books, 1976).

writing from exile. The task of Pordenone – as far as I know, the first serious retrospective of pre-1920s German cinema ever – was in a sense twofold. In line with the custom which the ‘Giornate’ have so admirably made into a tradition, the organizers relied on the primary sources. They scoured not only the German archives (the Bundesarchiv Koblenz – now incorporating the Staatliche Filmarchiv der DDR, the Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek Berlin, and the Filmmuseum Munich): as in previous years, it was archives such as George Eastman House Rochester, the Nederlands Film Museum Amsterdam and Gosfilmofond Moscow that provided some of the most exciting finds. In this respect, German unification and the end of the Cold War is showing unexpected benefits for film archivists, for more films seem to have survived than had previously been assumed. Thanks to the Pordenone showcase, archives have become more willing to spend time and money on restoration even of material that used to be thought worthless because commercial, popular, or unoriginal. But ‘Before Caligari’ was also an opportunity to present new academic research into early German cinema, and to show ‘revisionist’ film history in action. The catalogue brought together essays from German, British, American and Italian authors, and the round-table discussion at the end of the week gave organizers a chance to explain their selection and to invite first reactions. Opinion predictably polarized around the issue of how important, from an international perspective, German film production had been prior to the 1920s.

A number of historians and critics, after viewing the 140-odd films on show, thought that Eisner and others had been right: no need to revise the film histories. The old complaints – that German filmmakers were inept at editing, did not know how to tell stories, were poor at comedy – surfaced again. Kevin Brownlow (a spokesman for this view) conceded that even before the days of Karl Freund, Eugen Schüfftan and Herman Warm the films showed a mastery of lighting and decor. Others agreed that in general the output was mediocre, but that at least one ‘auteur’ had been discovered. This year it was Franz Hofer,⁷ director of five films at the retrospective, and subject of an article in the catalogue by Heide Schlüpmann. Finally, there were those who knew what they had come for, and were not disappointed: seven Asta Nielsen films (among them some previously thought lost) and two early Ernst Lubitsch productions (*Wenn vier dasselbe tun* [1916] and *Meier aus Berlin* [1919]). My own feeling after the symposium was that a chance had been missed to bring the ‘new film history’ more clearly to bear on the films and the period, as had happened the previous year at the close of the Russian retrospective. But then, on the strength of a mere quarter out of the six hundred films that have survived, which is itself no more than ten per cent at most of the films produced between 1896 and 1918, it would be foolish to

7 See Elena Dagrada, ‘Franz Hofer: un magico guardone alla corte di Guglielmo II’, *Immagine* (nuove serie), no. 17 (1991), pp. 23–30.

- 8 See Anton Kaes (ed.), *Kinodebatte* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1978).
- 9 Besides *Kinodebatte*, the best known are: Schiller National Museum (ed.), *Hätte ich das Kino* (Marbach: Klett, 1976); F. Güttinger (ed.), *Kein Tag ohne Kino: Schriftsteller über dem Stummfilm* (Frankfurt: Filmmuseum, 1984); and Heinz B. Heller, *Literarische Intelligenz und Film* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984).
- 10 See Hans Michael Bock, 'Berliner Ateliers: ein kleines Lexikon', in U. Berg-Ganschow and W. Jacobsen (eds), *Film ... Stadt ... Kino ... Berlin* (Berlin: Argon/Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1987); and W. Jacobson (ed.), *Erich Pommer* (Berlin: Argon/Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek, 1989).
- 11 See Julian Pettley, *Capital and Culture* (London: British Film Institute, 1978), which relies on the two standard German-language works: J. Spiker, *Film und Kapital*; and W. Becker, *Film und Herrschaft* (both Berlin: Verlag Volker Spiess, 1974/5), which are themselves indebted to P. Bächlin's 1947 socioeconomic study, *Der Film als Ware* (Frankfurt: Athenäum-Fischer, 1975), which itself goes back to the classic studies of the 1930s: F. D. Klingender and S. Legg, *Money Behind the Screen* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1937); and Mae D. Huttig, *Economic Control of the Motion Picture Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944).
- 12 There are three publishing projects under way to celebrate and/or reassess Ufa, to coincide with the studio's 75th birthday in 1992. See also W. Jacobsen (ed.), *Babelsberg 1912-1992* (Berlin: Argon, 1992).

pretend to anything definitive or even to any valid comparisons.

When taking a fresh looking at early German cinema, there is one other mountain to climb: the heavy theorization the cinema received in the late 1920s and early 1930s by German-speaking intellectuals. Georg Lukács, Belá Balász, Siegfried Kracauer, Rudolf Arnheim, Hans Richter, Guido Bagier (to mention only the best-known names) published widely on the cinema, and only Walther Benjamin's 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', a rather late addition to this debate, is widely known. Even more obscure (to the English-speaking reader) are Weimar film critics such as Hans Siemsen, Egon Friedell, Willy Haas and Alfred Kerr, all of whom not only wrote film reviews but also theorized about the cinema in general.⁸ Much of this is very interesting, but German film historians and university Germanists over the past fifteen years have tended to stick to these positions, and there is now no shortage of books which comment on and analyze the literary and intellectual 'response' to the emergence of cinema.⁹ What has suffered is serious work on production history, on the film companies, or on personalities other than directors.¹⁰ The origins of the German film industry have generally been treated merely as the prehistory of the founding in 1917 of Ufa,¹¹ a studio which is itself invariably viewed from a political and ideological, rather than from an economic, perspective.¹² Altogether scandalous is the lack of basic research on the films themselves: the only filmography is that compiled by the director Gerhard Lamprecht in the 1950s, a grand one-man effort, but necessarily unreliable and full of gaps. Given the high-culture bias about German cinema and the neglect of popular media intertexts, it was timely that Pordenone should want to concentrate on the films, and try to debunk the myths.

The selection was presented in roughly chronological order, probably the most useful way of drawing stylistic or formal comparisons with other national cinemas (although it disguised the value judgements that had gone into the choice in the first place). The scenics, actualities and comic sketches by Skladanowsky from the 1890s are very much in the Lumière tradition: Oskar Messter's *Tonbilder* ('sound pictures': mostly frontally filmed arias from well-known operas), on the other hand, show an early interest in synchronization along the lines of Edison's experiments. As to feature films, several genres were much in evidence: social drama and melodrama; comedies and farces; detective and crime film. Among the first were a number of war and propaganda films (*Wenn Völker streiten* [1914], *Weihnachtsglocken* [1914]). But most prominent were films centred on women and the family: a daughter driven from home by her father (*Alexandra – die Rache ist Mein* [1914]); a governess dismissed after an affair with the son of the family (*Die Erzieherin* [1911]); the social rise and disgrace of an artist's model (*Die Sünden der Väter* [1912]) and a fashion model

¹³ See my 'Filmgeschichte: Firmengeschichte: Familiengeschichte' in H. M. Bock and C. Lenssen (eds), *Joe May* (Munich: Text und Kritik, 1991).

¹⁴ See Elena Degrada, 'Eine Fliegenjagd'; and my 'National cinema – international style', both in *Before Caligari*, pp. 424–37, 338–55.

(*Heimgefunden* [1910]). The comedies ranged from military farces (*Hurra! Einquartierung!* [1913]); slapstick (*Der stellungslöse Photograph* [19??]); trick films (*Klebolin klebt alles* [1909]); to the surreal Karl Valentin films. Perhaps the most surprising discovery was a number of detective films which, though influenced by both French and Danish examples, nonetheless have some very distinctive features: they disprove, to my mind at least, that German filmmakers cannot plot narratives or do not use locations effectively. Three 'Stuart-Webbs' films (*Der Mann im Keller* [1914], *Der gestreifte Domino* [1915], *Das Schloss am Abhang* [1919]), directed by Joe May,¹³ Adolf Gärtner and Max Obal respectively; as well as Joseph Delmont's *Das Recht auf Dasein* (1913) and Franz Hofer's *Die schwarze Natter* (1913), proved that German 'classics' such as Fritz Lang's *Die Spinnen* (1919), *Dr Mabuse* (1922), and *Spione* (1928) came from a rich indigenous tradition. The selection also included some very sophisticated animation films in the Gaumont vein (*Wie Plimps und Plumps den Detektiv überlisten* [Otto Hermann, 1915]), as well as early work by Lotte Reiniger.

Both the prewar and immediate postwar cinema in Germany show, formally, many of the features of 'international' early cinema and the so-called transitional period.¹⁴ Frontal staging, spatial coherence and complex staging within the frame predominates over temporal sequence, and thus a different narrational logic obtains from that found in classical continuity cinema. Although it is difficult to think of a film from the early 1910s which could match, in its narrative sophistication, *Traffic in Souls* (George Lone Tucker, 1911) or the work of Maurice Tourneur, shown extensively at Pordenone in 1988, there were quite a few German films which seemed familiar with the emergent 'classical' or 'American' style: *Die Landstrasse* (Paul von Woringen, 1913) and *Das Tagebuch des Dr Hartl* (Paul Leni, 1916). The former (on which Frank Kessler has written an important essay in the catalogue) is reminiscent of Lois Weber's *Suspense* (1913), while the latter is strongly influenced by the Danish school (Robert Dinesen and Forest Holger-Madsen, for example). But the gap is also very clear when one compares Bolten-Baeckers's *The Hand of Justice* (1913; not shown at Pordenone, copy at the National Film Archive) with Tourneur's *Alias Jimmy Valentine* (1915; shown this year, in a print only found in 1989): both are based on the same O'Henry short story and, given that Bolten-Baeckers in the German context was a prolific, popular, and by no means 'backward' director, they could repay a more detailed comparison of their treatment of space, point-of-view editing and narration. Thus, paradoxically, some of the most important theoretical work on early German cinema is to be found in the various comparative style analyses by Barry Salt, Ben Brewster, Richard Abel, Kristin Thompson and Yuri Tsivian, even though these scholars are experts in other national cinemas and – with the

15 See Barry Salt, 'From Caligari to who?', *Sight and Sound*, vol. 48, no. 2 (1979), pp. 119–23, as well as *Before Caligari*, pp. 402–23.

16 Kristin Thompson, 'Lubitsch's lighting', unpublished paper given at the Lubitsch conference, University of East Anglia 1984; 'Dr Caligari at the Folies Bergères', in Mike Budd (ed.), *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari: Texts, Contexts, Histories* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), pp. 121–70; and *Before Caligari*, pp. 138–61.

17 See also Janet Bergstrom, 'Asta Nielsen's early German films', in Usai and Codelli (eds), *Before Caligari*, pp. 162–85.

18 See Corinna Müller, 'Emergence of the feature film', in *Before Caligari*, pp. 94–113.

19 See Georg Sesslen, 'Triviale Sehnsüchte', in H. Belach and W. Jacobsen (eds), *Richard Oswald* (Munich: Cinegraph/Text und Kritik, 1990), pp. 37–52.

exception of Salt¹⁵ and Thompson¹⁶ – have not written on German films. The preference for staging in depth, slow cutting rate and diffused or effect lighting styles gives us vital clues to French, Scandinavian or American influences, which in turn provides evidence about what German filmmakers would have regarded as important films.

If the Asta Nielsen/Urban Gad films are in a category apart,¹⁷ it is because nothing elsewhere in the German cinema of the time quite prepares one for the calculated contrast of lyricism, erotic passion and sordid realism in a film like *Vordertreppe und Hintertreppe* (Urban Gad, 1914): here one can detect influences on the films of Joe May and G. W. Pabst from the early 1920s. Pordenone has hopefully put to rest one persistent myth, namely that the German cinema can be neatly divided into 'realist' and 'fantastic' styles and genres. For what was noticeable beyond the individual films and their particular qualities was a very pronounced stratification into genres, which is to say into films for different audiences. The transition from single-reelers to multi-reel films – and especially from multi-reel noncontinuous films (episodic films such as the early detective serials) to narratively more integrated full-feature films – brought about in Germany a major change in the cinematic institution.¹⁸ Involving the question of the cinema's 'respectability', this seems to have led to a major segregation and bifurcation of production. The result was that the popular genres – in particular comedy and parody, but also melodrama – were formally, with only a slight temporal lag, beginning to imitate the American style (films by Richard Oswald, Joe May, E. A. Dupont, Richard Eichberg, and others). By contrast, psychological dramas, trying to woo better paying customers into the nascent luxury theatres, developed in more or less conscious opposition to the American feature film, and continued to do so for most of the early to mid 1920s, for reasons that have much to do with the fierce competition on the international film market after 1918.

This quality market came quite heavily under the influence of a number of media intertexts – theatre, operetta, the serialized novel – but also responded to the pressure to find subject matter which could be exported under the label of being recognizably German: the fairy-tale films of Paul Wegener, the gothic tales of Otto Rippert and Richard Oswald, and eventually, yes, 'Expressionist Cinema'. But an even more potent weapon in the struggle for embourgeoisement of the cinema was exoticism and orientalism, a tendency which can be read (from the perspective of 'realism') as an ideologically suspect attempt to remove action and setting from audiences' own immediate experience,¹⁹ or (from a 'culturalist' perspective) as testament to an emergent consumer society. One notes the vogue for Egypt and the Middle East in some of the films of Lubitsch (*Die Augen der Mumie Ma* [1918]), *Sumurum* [1920],

²⁰ For a more detailed argument, see my 'Reinhold Schünzel and *Hallo Caesar!*', in R. Dyer and G. Vincendeau (eds), *Popular European Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1992).

²¹ See T. Elsaesser (ed.), *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 1990).

²² See the studies of vaudeville, early film exhibition, international film export and screen practice undertaken by Robert C. Allen, Douglas Gomery, Kristin Thompson and Charles Musser.

Das Weib des Pharao [1921]) after the war; but one can also see exotic escapism in the two prewar Max Reinhardt films that were shown (*Die Insel der Seligen* [1913], *Venezianische Nächte* [1913]), which are best understood as borrowing from Shakespeare (*The Tempest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) in order to give cultural cachet to travelogues, for the smart set, on the Adriatic Coast and Venice. The popular genres, as far as one can tell, were wooing their audiences by appealing to different media intertexts: the romance novel, the newspaper, but also French and American crime films and comedies.²⁰

Early German Cinema, then, is a good example of a more general rule, namely that we cannot understand the films without the production context; but we cannot understand production on a national basis, partly because production was, at least until the outbreak of World War I, international, and more importantly because exhibition was international and remained so well into the war. To decide what is national about a national cinema, one always needs to know what films people saw, where and how they saw them, and what public opinion (the critics who either thought they represented it or who tried to create it) did with them. In this respect, both the catalogue and the symposium at Pordenone bore the stamp of a particular credo which is part of the festival's identity: what matters are the films. Such an approach is indispensable for a festival, for archives and for researchers. It is, on the other hand, at odds with certain other currents in film historical work. First of all, it resists attempts to 'theorize' early cinema practice, be it along the lines first undertaken by Noël Burch (in *Screen* in the 1970s) or, subsequently, by Tom Gunning, André Gaudreault and others.²¹ But it is also in a countercurrent to much empirical work which in recent years has concentrated on nonfilmic evidence, such as trade papers and exhibition practice, demographics about audiences and the siting of cinemas, company records, litigation files, distribution catalogues, and so on.²² Finally, it pays little attention to work at the intersection of both these currents, undertaken by feminists, about the female spectator.

By 1914, two million Germans a day are said to have gone to the cinema. Thus, anyone seriously interested in early German films has to study first of all the *Wilhelmine cinema*, that is, the conditions under which films were seen, and under which the cinema as a new medium came into existence. Particularly important is the evidence – no doubt not always reliable – of spectators on whom cinema made enough of an impression for them to fix their experiences in words: sometimes writers with populist sympathies, sometimes professional sociologists, most often and most vociferously those who were outraged by the cinema, who saw it as a threat to civilized life, moral values and national honour. There is also a mass of evidence in the early trade journals about the programmes and exhibition

23 'Early silent cinema – whose public sphere?' *New German Critique*, no. 29 (1983), pp. 147–84 (reprinted in Elsaesser, *Early Cinema*, pp. 228–46).

24 Heide Schlüpmann, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks: das Drama des frühen deutschen Kinos* (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1990).

venues which were most popular and therefore most lucrative. Ideally, only after this material has been collected and assessed can the German films that have survived be expected to give us meaningful evidence on the emergence of this new 'public sphere', and, in particular, on the relation between cinema and nationhood. This, at any rate, is the line taken by two scholars working within the 'Germanist' tradition, but who are also very conversant with current debates within film studies about the 'new film history': Miriam Hansen and Heide Schlüpmann.

Hansen's 1983 essay²³ took the then widely held view of cinema's proletarian origins and audiences, and tried to show that such an assumption not only flatters new-left hankering after a prelapsarian popular art, but too easily misses the fact that even contemporary accounts of cinemagoing were inflected by self-interested cultural discourses, whether by middle-class writers who liked to slum in the popular and the disreputable, or by morality apostles who wanted to appropriate the cinema and were therefore suspicious of its unregulated availability. More specifically, Hansen advances the argument that talk of a 'proletarian public sphere' (she is referring to the Habermas/Kluge debate) serves to disguise the extent to which early cinema exerts the kind of ambiguous fascination usually found in most cultural manifestations of the feminine – feared for its sexuality, patronized for its infantilism. Furthermore, one of the earliest sociological studies of the cinema anywhere, published in Germany in 1914, was written by a woman, Emilie Altenloh. Altenloh was especially interested in why women liked watching films, and found not only that they had marked preferences for certain genres, but also that they went to the cinema either as a special treat after an exhausting shopping trip, or in order to escape the boredom of their bourgeois homes.

One of the articles cited by Hansen is Heide Schlüpmann's 'Kinosucht', from the prestigious feminist journal *Frauen und Film* (no. 33 [1982]), in which the literary and intellectual cinephilia of the 1910s and 1920s is deconstructed as a displaced discourse about sexual difference and gender. Schlüpmann has now extended this essay into a full-scale study of early German cinema, entitled *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks* ('The Uncanny [of the] Gaze'),²⁴ in which she traces the context of Altenloh's pioneering *Soziologie des Kinos*, as well as the many other sociological, medical, educational, reformist, religious and xenophobic discourses proliferating during the first two decades of cinema's existence. She also takes on the philosophical and 'critical-theory' writers on cinema, notably early Lukács (and his borrowings from Georg Simmel) and Kracauer's essays from the 1920s (in which he takes key concepts such as 'distraction' and 'boredom' from Altenloh uncredited, mentioning gender only disparagingly: 'the little shop assistants at the movies').

Schlüpmann's book is extraordinary in its range, and very

ambitious. Besides offering a feminist critique of German aesthetics and nature philosophy since Nietzsche, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks* sheds new light on early cinema's relation to literature and to the theatre, on the question of respectability, and on the function of film criticism (with a detailed study of one of the first woman critics, Malwine Reinert, who – not unlike Altenloh – combined a feminist perspective with conservative-nationalist politics). Taking a generally Foucauldian view of the moralizing, aestheticizing and reforming pamphlets published in great quantities, Schlüpmann argues that male educators and patriarchal institutions saw in the film industry a threat to their possession of the masses (in the army, at school, at the workplace, they could be regimented and controlled; but in the cinema their time, thoughts and bodies were their own – to give to the spectacle, to visual pleasure, to daydreams and fantasy). Even the 'progressive' theories of Benjamin and other marxist writers made the mistake of seeing the cinema as a form of productivity that could be appropriated by and for the working masses, whereas the cinema's liberating potential lies in its models of consumption.

However, in the context of a retrospective such as 'Before Caligari', the most immediately rewarding and impressive aspect of Schlüpmann's work is her thorough acquaintance with scores of films that nobody had bothered to look at closely since they first went back into the cans and found their way into the archives' vaults. It is no accident that Schlüpmann rediscovered Franz Hofer and is given credit in the Pordenone catalogue for advising the organizers on the selection. Years of persistent digging in Frankfurt, Amsterdam and Berlin lie behind the close readings of the social films (*Heimgefunden* [1910]); the female detective films (*Das Recht auf Dasein* [1913]); the melodramas (*Vater dein Kind ruft* [1909], *Ich will keine Stiefmutter* [1910], *Eine grausame Ehe* [1910]); the comedies (*Don Juan heiratet* [1909], *Es wär so schön gewesen* [1910]); films about crossdressing (*Aus eines Mannes Mädchenzeit*, [1912]); and films that make fun of the reformers (*Wie sich der Kintopp rächt* [1912]). If nothing else, whether the movies were based on original topics or adapted from popular hits, whether they were German or plagiarized remakes of French or American films, they testify to the diversity of German production.

One might quibble at the way some of these films are themselves 'appropriated' for an argument about the representational freedom which the early German cinema gave to women's bodies, women's sexuality, women's curiosity, women's anxieties, women's fantasies, women's sense of solidarity: Schlüpmann's interest in early German (or Wilhelmine) cinema seems directly proportional to her dislike of Weimar cinema (the *Autorenfilme* of Wegener; the Expressionist films of Wiene and Paul Leni; the cinema of male anxiety and repression of Lang and Murnau; the fetishizing of the female body in Pabst). But in *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks*, this is merely the

implicit vantage point which allows the author to conduct a sort of archaeology of what might have been a female narrative voice representing female spectatorial interests, at a point in the cinema's history at which its development was still sufficiently open, its industrial organization sufficiently anarchic or small-scale, its place in the public sphere still too new and unsettling, for a concerted counterstrategy to have organized around its containment. This containment, according to Schlüpmann, was eventually orchestrated by an unholy alliance of conservative reformers, left-wing theorists, philosophers of the sublime and the beautiful, artist-directors wanting to enhance cinema's prestige, and exhibitors wishing to raise admission prices by making cinemagoing a social event for the bourgeoisie.

One of the most powerful weapons in Schlüpmann's analytical arsenal is her use of Tom Gunning's distinction between a 'cinema of attraction' and a 'cinema of narrative integration'. She is able to gender this distinction in much the same way Noël Burch tried to advance a class analysis of early cinema around 'tableau' and 'linearisation', Primitive Mode of Representation and Institutional Mode of Representation (which latter Miriam Hansen, among others, has criticized for its new-left nostalgia and ahistoricism). Indeed, Gunning's pair (and, addressing a slightly different agenda, André Gaudreault's distinction between 'monstration' and 'narration' – 'showing' and 'telling') was intended to give a more historically grounded and internally consistent, and less polemical, underpinning to the evident and important distinctions between early (up to 1917) cinema and 'classical' cinema. There is just the shadow of suspicion that we might have come full circle, as far as the theory of early cinema is concerned, since the time when Burch first put forward his ideas and inspired so many of us to take a more serious interest in preclassical cinema.

While on one side of the early cinema debate, scholars and archivists now want to concentrate on nothing but the films and their physical survival, and on the other comparatists look to refining and differentiating their formal categories in order to appreciate the many variables that enter into stylistic changes and determine institutional transformations, another argument is taking shape which seeks to forge more general, and generally valid, concepts that can integrate the development of early cinema into the larger battles around representation, legitimation and cultural discourse. It is the merit of Schlüpmann's book that in this respect it might inspire a passion for early German cinema of the sort Burch did for Edwin Porter and the British 'primitives'. But by the same token, *Unheimlichkeit des Blicks* will also give rise to counterargument, modification and reformulation. If this happens – not out of a need to 'deconstruct' in the name of yet another all-encompassing paradigm, but thanks to a closer attention to all the available

evidence, filmic and extrafilmic, which enthusiasm and hard work on behalf of early cinema is bringing to light – then both theory and history, both film studies and cultural politics, both the archive and the academy, will have gained.

reviews

review:

Anton Kaes, *From 'Hitler' to 'Heimat': The Return of History as Film*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1989, 273pp.

JULIA KNIGHT

The title of Anton Kaes's book is a deliberate allusion to Siegfried Kracauer's well-known study *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (first published in 1947), in which Kracauer undertakes to reveal Germany's deep psychological disposition towards fascism through an analysis of Weimar cinema. Although Kaes is not attempting a similar endeavour for a later era, the allusion is intended to signal an influence. Kracauer's opening sentence reads: 'This book is not concerned with German films merely for their own sake',¹ and Kaes acknowledges this as the approach he has adopted for his own project. In contrast to the auteurist methodology that has characterized so many of the discussions and studies of the so-called New German Cinema, Kaes stresses that he is 'less concerned with reading the films as autonomous artifacts or as individual expressions of idiosyncratic artists than with situating them in the cultural, social and political ambience from which they issue and within which they function'. (p. xi)

The particular 'cultural, social and political ambience' that concerns Kaes in *From 'Hitler' to 'Heimat'* is that of the Federal Republic in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During this period, he argues that, for a number of reasons – especially the political events of autumn 1977 and the broadcast of the US television series *Holocaust* on West German television in 1979 – the Germans finally began to 'remember', to take on board and deal with their recent history after years of steadfastly repressing it. During the 1950s, as

¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), p. v.

- 2 Carol Bergman, 'Sheer madness: an interview with Margarethe von Trotta', *Cineaste*, vol. 13, no. 4 (1984), p. 47.

Margarethe von Trotta has observed, the Nazi past had simply not been a subject for public discussion: 'We felt that there was a past of which we were guilty as a nation but we weren't told about in school. If you asked questions, you didn't get answers.'² As the seventies came to a close, however, this reticence finally gave way to an overwhelming preoccupation with the past and with German identity, resulting in, as Kaes terms it, attempts 'to rewrite German history, to fit the atrocities of the Hitler period into a tolerable master narrative'. (p. x)

Kaes maintains that the filmmakers of the New German Cinema played a particularly important role in this enterprise: hence the book's subtitle, *The Return of History as Film*. After a relatively (given the enormity of the subject matter) brief introduction discussing images of German history in film since the Third Reich, he conducts highly readable analyses of five New German Cinema films: Hans Jürgen Syberberg's *Hitler, a Film from Germany* (1977), Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *The Marriage of Maria Braun* (1978), Alexander Kluge's *The Patriot* (1979), Helma Sanders-Brahms's *Germany, Pale Mother* (1979–80) and Edgar Reitz's sixteen-hour epic *Heimat* (1984).

Through his analyses Kaes demonstrates that rather than being 'about' actual historical events, such as the Nazis' persecution of the Jews, all these (very different) films are concerned with exploring ways of trying to understand or make sense of recent history as a lived reality (both past and present) for German people. For instance, although the subject of Syberberg's theatrical film is Hitler, Kaes argues that 'the central project of the film is not the representation of Hitler himself but the presentation of the various ways in which Hitler has been represented'. (p. 49) Fassbinder's feature film, set in the war and immediate postwar period, can be viewed as an exploration of the interaction between personal stories and political history; while Kluge's film, focusing on the efforts of a fictional character to teach German history, suggests there is a need to find some way of physically connecting back to the past from the present – of 'touching' the past, as it were – if Germans are to succeed in 'working on' their history. In *Germany, Pale Mother*, Sanders-Brahms attempts to understand how her parents, particularly her mother, actually experienced the Third Reich and the postwar period in their everyday lives; and Reitz's *Heimat* (which can be only inadequately translated as 'Homeland'), covering the lives of the inhabitants of a fictional German village between 1919 and 1982, was received 'as an affirmation of Germany's yearning for a sense of identity, for a feeling of Heimat' (p. 191), a feeling long since lost as a legacy of Nazism.

What emerges from Kaes's five analyses is the sense of an overwhelming desire to counter populist representations of Germany's history – such as *Holocaust* – which foreground 'the

atrocities of the Hitler period', through the telling of private stories or *personal* history. The consequence of this, however, as Kaes (together with numerous other critics) points out, is that political events appear to be represented merely as a backdrop to, or as an intrusive element in, people's private lives, or else are excluded altogether. This in turn conveniently sidesteps, even denies, the wellworn question of who should bear responsibility for the atrocities committed under the Nazi regime. Although these filmmakers have undoubtedly participated in the 'rewriting' of German history, Kaes concludes therefore that it has been 'at the risk of appearing, or indeed becoming, revisionist'. (p. 197)

Kaes provides a wealth of interesting detail and background information in both his introduction and the subsequent chapters; including, for example, a discussion of Fassbinder's earlier attempt to deal with the problem presented by the memory of antisemitism: his play *Garbage, the City and Death* (1976). The author also more than adequately foregrounds the enormous problems inherent in any attempt to represent and 'remember' Germany's Nazi past. For instance, he contrasts the way in which a commercial television series like *Holocaust* – described by Miriam Hansen as one of the prevalent 'cartoon-like representations' of German history³ – was, according to critics, much more successful at informing Germans about Hitler's 'final solution' than Claude Lanzmann's filmed documentary act of remembering in the present, *Shoah* (1985).

However, much of this is hardly 'new'. As Kaes himself points out in his preface, different versions of three of the book's chapters had already appeared in various journals as early as 1985–6, and the whole book is in fact an 'adaptation' of his earlier German book *Deutschland: die Wiederkehr der Geschichte als Film* ('Germany: The Return of History as Film'), which was published in 1987. Although his film analyses are both accessible and interesting, extensive discussions of most of the films have in fact been undertaken elsewhere in a whole range of journals and books, especially in the case of Syberberg's *Hitler* film and Reitz's *Heimat*.⁴ Furthermore, in *New German Cinema: A History* (published the same year as *From 'Hitler' to 'Heimat'*), Thomas Elsaesser, in the chapter 'Returning home to history', includes a very similar – albeit somewhat briefer – discussion referencing the same films. Indeed, given the vast array of literature and articles already published on the New German Cinema, it is a little disappointing that Kaes limits himself to films by five already well-established directors, four of whom – Syberberg, Fassbinder, Kluge and Reitz – have repeatedly formed the focus of critical attention.

Kaes also goes to some lengths to justify film as a worthwhile object of study with regard to debates about German history and identity. He argues that these films 'can be seen as interventions in cultural and political life', but does so on the basis that they 'not

3 Miriam Hansen, 'Dossier on *Heimat*', *New German Critique*, no. 36 (1985), p. 4.

4 See, for instance, 'Special Issue on *Heimat*', *New German Critique*, no. 36 (1985).

5 According to Kaes twenty-five million West Germans saw at least one episode of *Heimat* on television and an average of nine million viewers watched each episode.

only reach a much larger popular audience than, say, speeches, conference papers, or books; they also tend to move and manipulate spectators in a more direct emotional way'. (p. x) While this may be true for Reitz's *Heimat*,⁵ and while most German feature films are coproduced by television and thus receive a television screening, films such as Syberberg's *Hitler, a Film from Germany* and Kluge's *The Patriot*, which eschew the use of dominant film conventions, are not easy 'popular' viewing. Kaes's arguments therefore seem to undermine the rationale for his book. This is reinforced when, at the end of his introduction, he maintains that in the wake of the impact of *Holocaust*, 'German filmmakers felt challenged to come to terms with German history and its images' (p. 35, my emphasis), yet explores the work of only five of these filmmakers.

This is not to suggest that the films Kaes has chosen are not important objects of study – especially since, as he stresses, many people experience history only through visual images and the audiovisual media – but that the specific focus is rather small given the context Kaes himself imposes. That said, however, the inclusion of a woman filmmaker in a major study dealing with the New German Cinema is to be welcomed.

Totally excluded from, or referenced only briefly in, most studies of the country's 'new' cinema, the work of Germany's women directors has long been in need of sustained in-depth critical discussion. Indeed, despite the aforementioned reservations, it is in fact precisely Kaes's approach – which largely breaks with the traditional auteurist methodology, and which explores the concern with personal history – that permits the inclusion of Helma Sanders-Brahms. The emphasis on individual creative genius that characterizes classic auteurism, combined with the often explicitly autobiographical nature of many women directors' films, has functioned at a number of different levels to inhibit serious consideration of the work of women filmmakers.⁶ In contrast, Kaes shows how an important strand within women's film production – an exploration of personal history – constitutes part of the New German Cinema. It is only to be regretted that he has not also looked at the work of such women directors as Margarethe von Trotta, Marianne Rosenbaum, Jutta Brückner and Claudia von Alemann, all of whom have contributed to debates on history and memory through their work.

If anything, however, *From 'Hitler' to 'Heimat'* can be viewed as a kind of sequel to Timothy Corrigan's *New German Film: The Displaced Image* (1983), which offered analyses of six films made during the 1970s. In his review of this book, Kaes asserts that through these analyses Corrigan 'tries to show that German filmmakers, "displaced" between the cultures of postwar Germany and the United States, are engaged in an inevitable love-hate relationship with Hollywood and its filmic conventions'.⁷ In his own

6 For a fuller discussion of this, see my forthcoming book, *Women and the New German Cinema* (London: Verso, 1992).

7 Anton Kaes, 'Distanced observers: perspectives on the New German Cinema', *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, vol. 10, no. 3 (1985), p. 242.

book – which starts with the very film Corrigan's ends with, Syberberg's *Hitler* film – Kaes is arguing that towards the end of the seventies the preoccupations of the New German Cinema directors shifted, and began to demonstrate a desire to find a self-determined national identity, to reassert or 'replace' themselves, as it were, as German.

review:

Jonathan Hacker and David Price, *Take 10: Contemporary British Film Directors*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991, 434pp.

Duncan J. Petrie, *Creativity and Constraint in the British Film Industry*. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991, 249pp.

JOHN HILL

One of the more ironic aspects of Margaret Thatcher's departure from prime-ministerial office in November 1990 was its consequences for the British film industry. In the previous June, more than twenty representatives of the industry had attended a seminar, chaired by Mrs Thatcher herself, at 10 Downing Street. The seminar had been arranged in response to approaches from Sir Richard Attenborough, chairman of both the British Film Institute and the British Screen Advisory Council; and he was evidently pleased with the outcome: 'The government is demonstrating that films are back on the agenda and the Prime Minister is responsible', he commented afterwards.¹ The Prime Minister's apparent commitment was reflected in a number of promises made as a result of the meeting: financial support for European coproduction: a commitment to Media 92 (the audiovisual programme of the European Community); a review of policies designed to stimulate overseas investment in UK film production and to market and promote British films abroad; and, finally, the establishment of two working parties on the structure of the industry and related fiscal matters. In the wake of Mrs Thatcher's departure, however, the momentum for change slowed and many of the proposals which had emerged from the Downing Street seminar were delayed, amended or simply abandoned.

Although the government did finally commit itself to the

¹ *Screen International*, 23–29 June 1990, p. 4.

establishment of a UK Film Commission, designed to attract foreign film production to the UK, it stalled plans for an export agency and announced that it was to hold back part of the promised five million pounds for European coproduction as a part subscription to Eurimages (the Council of Europe's production and distribution support fund). Most damagingly of all, however, Chancellor of the Exchequer Norman Lamont, in his budget of March 1991, rejected all of the proposals of the working group on tax reform. This group, under the chairmanship of BFI director Wilf Stevenson, had reported the previous year with three main recommendations: tax relief for foreign artists working in the UK, accelerated writeoffs against tax, and the establishment of a new tax vehicle modelled on the French *Sociétés de Financement de l'Industrie Cinématographique et Audiovisuel* (Soficas) which would entitle shareholders to tax exemption or deferral. While he appreciated the 'important contribution' of the British film industry to 'entertainment and culture', Lamont informed the House of Commons that he could not accept any of these suggestions.²

² *Screen Finance*, 20 March 1991, p. 3.

This was not the first time the Chancellor had remained unmoved in the face of the film industry's requirements. As the then 'Films Minister' he had also been responsible for bringing before the Commons the 1985 Films Bill (later Act). In line with general government policy, this had been designed to reduce state support for the industry, and involved the abolition of the Eady Levy (a charge on exhibitors returned to producers) and the part 'privatization' of the National Film Finance Corporation, subsequently British Screen. In a similar spirit, the government had already abandoned the quota of British films required to be shown by exhibitors, and abolished the capital allowance scheme under which many of the British films of the early 1980s had been financed. Intended to strengthen the industry by subjecting it to the bracing winds of the market, such policies succeeded only in enfeebling it further. City investment in film production all but dried up; the UK majors confined themselves to distribution and exhibition; and US sources of funding proved unreliable, especially in the wake of the financial difficulties experienced by US independent distributors at the end of the decade. As a result, British production fell in 1989 to its lowest level for eight years. Moreover, despite the government's determination that the film industry should stand on its own feet, it was also apparent that what stability the industry enjoyed was the result of a continuing dependence upon the state – either directly in the form of financial support (provided by British Screen, the BFI Production Fund, the Scottish Film Production Fund and the Arts Councils), or indirectly through television (Channel Four in particular) which as a result of government legislation and licence enjoyed some protection from strictly commercial requirements. Indeed, as if in recognition of the

failure of its policies to stimulate the industry in the way it had hoped, the government was forced to agree to a further three years' funding of British Screen, which had been intended to be self-supporting by 1990.

Thus, despite the many claims for a 'renaissance' of British cinema at the start of the eighties, it was evident at the end of the decade that British film production continued to be beset by difficulties. These difficulties and their consequences for contemporary British filmmakers are assessed in two new books: Jonathan Hacker and David Price's *Take 10: Contemporary British Film Directors* and Duncan Petrie's *Creativity and Constraint in the British Film Industry*. While both share a concern with the financial and industrial context of British filmmaking, their approaches are nonetheless quite distinct and, in certain respects, complementary.

Take 10 consists of an introductory essay on the state of the British film industry, followed by a series of separate discussions of, and interviews with, ten British film directors (Lindsay Anderson, Richard Attenborough, Bill Forsyth, Stephen Frears, Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman, Ken Loach, Alan Parker, Nicholas Roeg, and John Schlesinger). Although the authors indicate that this approach is intended to provide not only 'a study of British creative directorial talent' but also 'a cross-section of the problems, financial and creative, that exist in British film' (p. 22), the results are mixed. This is partly because many of the issues identified in the introduction – the problems of production finance, the relationship between film and television, the aesthetic traditions of British cinema and their relationship to both Hollywood and European models of filmmaking – are not pursued with any consistency in the essays and interviews which follow; with the result that the profiles of the directors are more or less self-contained and fail to add up to an overall picture of contemporary British filmmaking strategies. A further problem in this regard is the actual selection of directors for inclusion. Whether Alan Parker, for example, who has made only one British feature film (*Bugsy Malone*, 1976) is usefully regarded in the context of British cinema at all must be open to doubt. In their introduction, Hacker and Price suggest that it is possible to identify 'a discernibly British style' (p. 2) which they presumably find in evidence in the Hollywood films of a British director such as Parker. What this might consist of (ham-fisted direction? obvious point-making?) is not, however, investigated and would surely have proved an unprofitable exercise if it had. Similar questions also arise in relation to Lindsay Anderson and John Schlesinger. For, despite their contribution to the British cinema of the past, neither has been an active presence in the British cinema of the eighties; and this is reflected in the authors' failure to find anything fresh to say about them.

Far more useful would have been a fuller consideration of the

work of directors whose careers have been more intimately bound up with the eighties and who have yet to receive sustained critical attention. Directors who fit this bill – such as Peter Greenaway and Stephen Frears – provide the book's most successful sections, and clearly there are others who could productively have been included. Thus, whatever the actual merits of his films, a discussion of the career of Hugh Hudson would clearly have helped shed light on the current state of the industry, precisely because it encapsulates what has conventionally been regarded as the high and low points of British filmmaking in the eighties: the Oscar-winning success of *Chariots of Fire* (1981) followed by the financial disaster of *Revolution* (1985). And, insofar as other directors in the book – such as Frears and Jarman – are ready to blame him for wasted opportunities, it would obviously have been of interest to hear how Hudson himself assesses his past career. However, what probably kept Hudson out, along with other more artistically adventurous directors, is the authors' requirement that they not only be 'well established' but also have a 'significant body' of work behind them. (p. 22) One of the main problems of the British film industry, however, is that opportunities for directors to become 'well established' have not been generally available. As a result, many of the directors responsible for the decade's most interesting work (Bill Douglas, Terence Davies, Ron Peck, Chris Petit, Sally Potter, Lezli-An Barrett, Peter Wollen) failed to make more than one or two feature films.

In this sense, *Creativity and Constraint in the British Film Industry* is probably more successful in delineating the vicissitudes of British filmmaking during the 1980s. Duncan Petrie's examination of British film production is in fact part of a larger sociological project concerned to locate aesthetic creativity within an economic and cultural context. This theoretical account of creativity is, however, one of the least satisfactory parts of the book, and quickly gives way to a review of the related – but nonetheless separate – issue of authorship. Petrie's thesis, in this regard, is one of qualified auteurism. Thus, while he wishes to distance himself from romantic conceptions of creativity and to demonstrate the various constraints which structure the artistic process, he also wants to do justice (in a way, he argues, that structuralist and poststructuralist accounts of film have not) to the artistic and communicative 'intentionalities' of the filmmakers themselves. The resulting tension between 'objective determinants' and 'subjective intentions' is then explored through an examination of the ways in which the prevailing technological, financial and aesthetic relations characteristic of the British film industry have shaped filmmaking practices during the 1980s. The influence of the more general political and ideological climate is not, however, considered – although many of the most prominent films of the decade clearly bear the marks of the Thatcher years. Much of

what then follows covers relatively familiar territory; but the book's two main chapters on the financing, sales, distribution, and marketing of British features are nonetheless successful in providing a clear and – apart from the absence of any consideration of the consequences for film producers of a continuing duopoly in British exhibition – generally authoritative account of the workings of the industry.

The book is helped in this regard by the range of interviews the author has conducted with industry personnel. It is a central part of Petrie's argument that filmmaking must be analysed as a collaborative process; and the comments of cinematographers Michael Coulter and Roger Deakins and of editor Tom Priestley and designer Christopher Hobbs provide a valuable complement to those of the directors included in *Take 10*. However, it is probably the producers who emerge with most force in Petrie's discussions: not so much the 'super-producers' Jeremy Thomas and David Puttnam, who now have the means to put together large-scale international projects; but the younger breed of producers, represented by Tim Bevan and Sarah Radclyffe of Working Title and Stephen Woolley at Palace, who have attempted to combine relatively modest budgets with a degree of aesthetic and political invention. Given the one-off nature of most British film production and its dependence upon increasingly complicated methods of financing and preselling, Petrie is clearly right to highlight the producer's role in sustaining British filmmaking in recent years. However, in bringing producers to the fore in this way, he also begins to lose sight of directors (whose 'intentionalities' he had originally set out to restore). The emphasis on constraints (including a chapter devoted to the traditional aesthetic conservatism of the British cinema) tends to work against a recognition of what directors actually do achieve; while the attempt to revamp auteurism is necessarily weakened by the absence of any detailed consideration of the films themselves. Thus, while the book is generally partisan on behalf of British films and British filmmakers, it fails to provide a satisfactory demonstration of their attributes or to make a fully convincing case for their importance.

In a sense, this is a gap which should have been filled by the authors of *Take 10*, but their more straightforward auteurism is let down by a reluctance to stray too far from a director's own views, or from those of contemporary reviewers, with the result that the commentaries fail to deliver the kinds of insight which would make the films matter. Moreover, despite the diverse aesthetic strategies employed by their ten directors, Hacker and Price are loath to state a critical preference or come to any critical judgement beyond the occasional mild rebuke (of the order that Loach has become too political, or that Parker can be superficial). Admittedly, the authors do state in their introduction that they want to leave it 'up to the reader' to decide whose work is the 'most successful, laudable, or

valuable'. (p. 23) The problem with this, however, is not only that it absolves them of responsibility for a task which they might quite legitimately have been expected to undertake, but also that it ducks the very issues they have already raised regarding the economic viability and cultural value of different filmmaking practices.

Economic viability and cultural value can, of course, pull in different directions – which is why it is important to argue for proper state support of indigenous filmmaking, for support of the kind the current government has been so loath to provide. However, it is also important to argue for the kinds of films which most deserve support. The problem with *Take 10's* abstentionist approach is that the value of British cinema in itself is too readily accepted, so that the values of different kinds of British filmmaking are neither assessed nor argued over. The defence of British films on the grounds that 'they will foster a distinctive sense of identity and community' (p. 2) is particularly problematic in this respect. For one of the traditional failings of British cinema has been the very restricted conceptions of national identity and national characteristics it has projected. The kind of British cinema most worth having, therefore, is far from being one which attempts to foster mythical constructions of national identity: rather it should be one which queries and challenges traditional conceptions of 'Britishness' and seeks to do justice to the range of cultural identities and social differences existing within the United Kingdom.

Moreover, in the changed market conditions of the eighties and nineties, the relationship between economic viability and cultural value has become more complex. Owing to the decline in the theatrical home market, the UK film industry has become more dependent on foreign markets and alternative outlets (television, video). The historical inclination of British filmmakers has been to attempt to break into the US market by emulating Hollywood levels of budget and style of production; but the futility of this enterprise has been demonstrated once again by Goldcrest. On the other hand, low-budget British films (*My Beautiful Laundrette* [1985], *High Hopes* [1988]), rooted in local concerns and aimed initially at the home film and television market, have actually succeeded in finding an audience in the USA. Moreover, British films with a European orientation (such as those of Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman, Terence Davies, and Ken McMullen) have proved that filmmaking can be viable without significant US exposure.

Indeed, it was the opportunities provided by the European market (especially from 1992 onwards) which, to return to my starting point, constituted in large part the focus of the Downing Street seminar. One explanation of Mrs Thatcher's belated bout of enthusiasm for the British film industry, it has been suggested, was her 'vision' of 'Britain as the future centre of European filmmaking'.³ To be sure, if it was a vision it was not a cultural one

3 Mark Lefanu and Neil McCartney, *Screen Finance*, 12 June 1991, p. 2.

4 *Screen Finance*, 6 September 1990, p. 9.

motivated by any sort of concern for filmmakers like Greenaway, but an economic one based on the desire to make Britain an attractive place for films to be made – either by Americans desiring entry to the European single market or by Europeans wishing to make films in English in order to gain access to the North American market. It is not surprising therefore that the establishment of a UK Film Commission, designed to attract foreign film productions, proved the easiest proposal for the Conservative government to implement. However, this has also been true of those within the British film industry itself: as Terry Ilott observes, they have been concerned only with ‘the financial and commercial possibilities of the European marketplace’ and have largely ignored ‘the cultural, artistic or technical gains that might arise from European cooperation’.⁴ The irony of this is that the ability to take advantage of the European possibilities depends not only on economic conditions (‘the levelling of the European playing field’ through the regularization of forms of state support and tax incentives) but also on cultural considerations, on what kinds of British films are made and to whom they are addressed (without then suggesting that selfconscious targeting of the tastes of an imagined European audience is likely to be any more successful than pandering to the assumed tastes of a US one). The UK’s position at the crossroads between Europe and the United States therefore raises not only economic questions about film funding arrangements but also cultural ones about British cinema’s own identity and its relationship with different models and traditions of filmmaking and different audiences. These two new books have begun the important job of addressing these questions. The debate, however, must continue.

review:

Jo Spence and Patricia Holland (eds), *Family Snaps: The Meanings of Domestic Photography*. London: Virago, 1991, 252pp.

Valerie Walkerdine, *Schoolgirl Fictions*. London: Verso, 1991, 216pp.

HELEN GRACE

On the cover of Valerie Walkerdine's *Schoolgirl Fictions* is a reproduction of a series of reworked snapshots. The image is quite highly coloured, and the repetition – and difference – of its segments gives a vibrancy to the work, which suggests something of the appeal which the uses of domestic photography has had in any number of artistic practices in recent years. Not only has it been possible to explore complex personal/political experience; it has also allowed for the production of images which succeed technically in extending the parameters of representation, disrupting the demands of the ahistorical aesthetics of modernism. In short, the image 'reproduces well' – an appropriate measure of effectiveness within a politics of representation which seeks to engage with the problems of reproduction at the level of social values (within, for example, schooling) and within the family – the key site of its operation.

Unfortunately, reproduction fails utterly, at one level, in Jo Spence and Patricia Holland's edited collection, *Family Snaps*. The reproduction of the photographs is on the whole so bad that they become entirely superfluous to the text. It is one thing to question the photograph's capacity to speak for itself, but another thing entirely to deny it any specificity, any rhetoric of its own (while all the time referring to the rhetoric it is assumed to have). While in a number of the examples included it is possible to grasp the point which the writer is making about photography or the photographs

used, in other cases we are left with blurry blobs of ink which could not by any stretch of the imagination be called photographs. For example, in the photograph of Annette Kuhn, aged six, we are entirely dependent on the written text to assure us that she is holding her pet budgie and not a piece of Kentucky Fried Chicken. In fact, there seems to be such a degree of ambivalence about photography throughout the book that it would seem it could be dispensed with entirely, to be replaced by a completely verbal analysis of a set of familial performances of which vague memories remain.

In Jeremy Seabrook's article, '“My life is in that box”', the photographs which illustrate the article are never referred to: they function as generic examples, not of domestic photography but of its *uses*; while the stories which people tell of their photographs function, in a sense, as the most *visual* aspect of the argument. In Jo Spence's 'Soap, Family Album Work . . . and Hope' an advertisement for professional photography, with a title saying 'It's a shame to forget your family', is reworked; and a photograph of the ideal family is replaced with another of a man unzipping his fly. The latter is a 'quotation' of a well-known Robert Mapplethorpe photograph of a black man in a polyester suit with his penis exposed – an image which in its original context enters into a very complex sex/race dynamic within a gay male subculture.¹ In the context of *Family Snaps*, however, the photograph is used as a comment on family life – suggesting sexual abuse, with the father as its monstrous perpetrator. This reading becomes possible not because of the way photography is appropriated, but rather because of the use of the words 'shame' and 'family' in the caption. Of course this is sheer speculation on my part: because there is no reference to the images in the text, they function as a shorthand means of explaining why psychotherapy is necessary in untangling the damage which it is assumed the family inevitably causes.

To demand that good reproductions should accompany a book on photography – even domestic photography – opens one to accusations of having a fetishistic relation to the object. The aura, as we know, is gone, and why should we want it back? But there is an issue at stake here. In analysing popular cultural forms, surely it is necessary to refer to them and to distinguish them from other forms? How can we critically explain their power if we strip them of its signifiers in the name of analysis? More seriously, it seems we are lumbered with authors and international publishing houses locked into the production of literature rather than the reproduction of popular cultural forms. Literary style is allowable, even encouraged, but other forms of rhetoric prove too difficult. I know it's all a question of economics, but I refuse to accept that the junk mail I get in my letterbox has to look better than the critical material I want to read. If we're talking about photography, is it too much to ask that we occasionally see the photographs?

¹ For an analysis of the Mapplethorpe image, in which the photograph is central, see Paul Foss, 'Mapplethorpe aglance', *Photofile* vol. 3, no. 3 (1985), pp. 8–10.

There are, however, strengths in *Family Snaps*, particularly in the crosscultural experiences with photography included in the collection. In her introduction, Patricia Holland begins by claiming that the making and preserving of a family snapshot is 'an act of faith in the future'. (p. 1) She also notes that

At a time when the family group – at least in the overdeveloped West – is fragmented and atomised, images continue to be produced which reassure us of its solidity and cohesion. (p. 1)

This concern for the decline of the family is a theme which recurs throughout the book, concluding with the articles by Jo Spence and by Rosy Martin on the practice of phototherapy that they have developed. In the first section, 'The Child I Never Was', a traumatized familial experience is reconsidered through photographic fragments. In the accounts given by Annette Kuhn ('Remembrance'); Simon Watney ('Ordinary boys'); Valerie Walkerdine ('Behind the painted smile'); and Patty Levey ('Self-portraits') there is an encounter with what Holland refers to as 'the shocking image of our earlier selves'. (p. 2) Annette Kuhn's Barthesian reading emphasized the 'tension between past and present' (p. 24) which helps to explain the fascination of the family photograph; and Simon Watney's Extended Family album points to the possibility of other meanings of 'family', a fragment in a larger gay history.

In Jo Stanley's '“Well, who'd want an old picture of me at work?”', the ways in which forms of history writing revalue snapshots is indicated: working-class women may see no value in the images unless someone engaged in local history projects constitutes the snapshots as meaningful for them. However, such projects are also in some danger of overstating their effectiveness in bringing about change. At the beginning of her article, Stanley parodies earlier historical research in its inadequacy to the task of dealing with working-class women's history –

The old and privileged approach is to sit in private-ish libraries at polished tables reading crumbling yellow dossiers of facts that powerful men have deemed worth recording (p. 61) –

while towards the end she notes (a little wide-eyed and bushy-tailed) that

In the two years since the project began, the pictures, the autobiographical fragments and the researched text have shown us something quite shocking: how little the structural oppression of working-class women has changed in the last half-century. (p. 71)

She concludes her article by observing that

the people most oppressed by our current society are the least visible. At least if we see the problems fully we can start working towards the solutions. (p. 71)

Had she read any of the yellowing volumes of official reports in libraries, she would have realized that the problems have been visible for at least one hundred and fifty years.

Terry Dennett's 'Popular photography and labour albums' takes up a concern he has had for many years and contains a note of optimism, holding out hope for a future 'when there *will* again be a variety of means of mass distribution'. (p. 83) The article also contains the most wonderful photograph (though again it is poorly reproduced) in *Family Snaps* – a picture of Ruth and Eddie Frow in bed, surrounded by their books. This primal scene of enthusiastic autodidacticism provides an appealing counter to the anxious bedroom dramas of psychoanalysis, and the pleasures being indulged in by the happy couple seem both innocent and positively dangerous.

The third section of the book, 'Changing Faces, Moving Places', is its strongest. A wider angle view of the world begins to emerge, a perspective which takes us beyond England, the place called Home for all those in colonial service. The servitude imposed on Others by colonialism is contextualized in Adeola Solanke's marvellous 'Complex, not confused'. Here we have a view of the world which moves beyond the family portrait, even though family portraits are used to reflect on the effects of colonialism; and even though it is the family that bears the weight of it:

Family is of the utmost importance in Africa. With the virtual non-existence of social security and welfare provisions, people depend on their relatives to a much greater extent than they do in Britain. This dependence extends to family overseas, especially in the context of contemporary Africa's economic crisis. Having a relative abroad has become for many families, hit by chronic unemployment and spiralling inflation caused by International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan conditions, the only hope. (p. 133)

The piece concludes with a new demand for independence, one which relates to a politics of representation in a very real sense – a request that the '*images* representing the public soul of pre-colonial Africa' (p. 138) be liberated from the vaults of the British Museum.

In Andrew Dewdney's 'More than black and white: the extended and shared family album', there is an emphasis on issues of racism and migration in Australia. The project, carried out through educational institutions, including Tranby Aboriginal College, used family snapshots, media surveys and snapshot assignments to produce an exhibition for schools.

In Stuart Hall's 'Reconstruction work: images of post-war black

settlement', photography is used to reflect on the experience of postwar immigration to Britain. The arrival of people from the Caribbean in the 1950s is recorded by news agency photographers and represented as the arrival of 'colour problems'. But Hall's reading of the photographs, directed at the formality and respectability of the immigrants' self-presentation, suggests the opposite. He identifies this as a certain form of innocence, noting that innocence is 'a dangerous, ambiguous, ambivalent construction for black people':

These people have just survived the longest, hardest journey of their lives: the journey to another identity. They are people 'in transition' to a new state of mind and body: migranhood. (p. 154)

Further analysis of news photos of black migration – and in particular a *Picture Post* feature from 1954 entitled 'Would you let your daughter marry a negro?' – reveals the fear behind the fascination with 'colour problems':

at the centre of the problem – the problem of the problem, so to speak – was the core issue of sexuality: specifically, sexual relations between different ethnic or racial groups – or, to give it its proper name, the traumatic fantasy of miscegenation. (p. 162)

But the complexity of this 'traumatic fantasy' is emphasized in Leanne Klein's article, 'Eastern promise', on mail-order bride schemes. In this traffic in women, images similar to those used in advertising exotic Asian holidays are employed to sell women to European men. But the terrors of miscegenation do not appear to have the same force when men desire the Other. The history of colonialism is a history of the desire for the Other exercised as *droit de seigneur*. It is when a *daughter* desires the Other that the father is called upon to intervene: it is at this moment that the fantasy becomes traumatic.

The family has, in a sense, always been the front line in the economic and social reorganizations which have taken place in the last two hundred years in the West. In noting that family albums – 'private and archaic museums of kinship' – have ceased to be living forces as they are appropriated within archives and museums, Jeremy Seabrook neatly summarises the demise of traditional family forms within the modern state:

As the security of people became more or less guaranteed by the provision of welfare, the function of those large and often resentful agglomerations of people in looking after each other swiftly fell into decay. This led directly to the consolidation of the nuclear family – a much freer, if more depleted unit, in which the constraints and disciplines of the kinship network gave way to

certain forms of emancipation, but also to new kinds of loneliness and isolation. (p. 184).

In Valerie Walkerdine's *Schoolgirl Fictions*, the school is identified as one of the sites taking up some of the functions of the family. The book brings together a number of Walkerdine's previously published pieces; the longer, more theoretically informed articles being intersected with shorter confessional pieces – diary notes, poems, memories. These pieces are rather like snapshots, providing a life-history which explains the life-work.

However, I must confess to being totally defeated and paralysed by the immensity and insurmountability of the problem as presented by Walkerdine. Some examples will suffice to illustrate the reductive nature of the argument:

The family and the primary school are sites for the regulation and production of the modern conception of the individual. (p. 29)

(There is a warning to women who might want to have a go at autonomy):

But might we not emerge as individuals only to be further implicated in the patriarchal and logocentric tradition which proposes the bourgeois individual as guarantor of the new order? (p. 36)

(But if you thought change was possible, think again):

Bourgeois democracy operates in relation to a nexus of practices which aim at the production of a self-regulatory citizen, who has integrated love and hate, and for whom no fantasy perfect good or evil Other exists. The displacement of religion into science displaces that perfect Other, God, that safe place in the sky, on to an 'adjustment to reality', to the existing social order. (p. 56)

I am sympathetic to the theoretical framework, but the language is terrible! This is not a Foucault I recognize, and I am crushed by its weight. Something must have happened in the Channel crossing: a sea change must have taken place. This is one of the mysteries of translation – which perhaps also explains the difficulty I have in responding to the weight of Walkerdine's book and to a certain sadness which I see in Spence and Holland's poignant and moving collection.